

Environmental spy



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# BEYOND INFINITY

STRANGE TALES FROM  OTHER DIMENSIONS







## 382 WORDS *from the editor*

IF YOU'RE LOOKING for bug-eyed monsters carting off well-constructed females, BEYOND INFINITY is not your meat. If you want wild, Bondian adventure on the outer rim of the universe, in *The Black Nebula*, then you'll have to look for it elsewhere.

With BEYOND INFINITY we're reaching—*beyond*. It is only a hairline, perhaps right at your feet, that divides you from—something, a world you never knew, yet somehow WANTED to believe in. For you can be *sure* there is something BEYOND INFINITY, a force, a vitality, an *aware aliveness* over there in another dimension, just awaiting a *touch* to spill over into *our* world, or draw you to it.

We like to think of this force, this vital essence, as having a sense of rough justice, so that its intrusion into our world or its inclusion of *you* in *its* world—always restores the rightful balance of things, as no force within our present ken can do.

*Mostly*, that is. Sometimes things can go awry, even with the balanced awareness of that force from BEYOND INFINITY. Or perhaps some counter force intervenes, pro-

*doing* a chaos beyond imagining. You *never* know.

That, we feel, is one of the spices of BEYOND INFINITY.

Who would expect to find the Devil at a church bazaar? And if you *did*, wouldn't you naturally expect HIS justice to be ironic, a gigantic travesty on true justice?

And when you have Nothing To Fear, then you should fear Nothing, which is a terrible thing, a frightening, horrifying chaos.

And who, except a paper man, can be injured by a paper bullet? But from what source? Such a devastating shot can only come from BEYOND INFINITY.

And if you looked in the Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, you'd expect to see your own face, wouldn't you? But what if you *didn't*? What if, of all horrors, you didn't see—*anything*?

And if you sat in The Thirteenth Chair and defied the Future, what would your future be? What if you suddenly realized, with dawning horror, that The Thirteenth Chair.....

It is the What-If-ness of things that makes BEYOND INFINITY a new and different magazine. There just *might* be that vital force from BEYOND INFINITY that could reach out and touch YOU. Of course, if you have Nothing To Fear, then you're safe. Or *are* you?

DOUG STAPLETON,

*Editor, BEYOND INFINITY*

# BEYOND INFINITY



VOLUME I, NUMBER 1

NOV-DEC, 1967

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| OF HUMAN HERITAGE by Wade Hampton .....     | 4   |
| TALK TO ME, SWEETHEART by Ben Bova .....    | 32  |
| GREETINGS, FRIEND!                          |     |
| by Douglas & Dorothy Stapleton .....        | 138 |
| HIRLIGIG! by John Brunner .....             | 20  |
| REVENGE AT THE TV CORRAL!                   |     |
| by J. de Jarnette Wilkes .....              | 72  |
| MOMMY, MOMMY, YOU'RE A ROBOT                |     |
| by Dexter Carnes .....                      | 116 |
| THE THIRTEENTH CHAIR                        |     |
| by Michael Quentin Lanz .....               | 86  |
| 5-4-3-2- by James McKimney .....            | 46  |
| DEADLY IMAGE by McHugh Ferriss .....        | 60  |
| THE NEW WAY by Christopher Anvil .....      | 150 |
| UPON REFLECTION by Gilmore Barrington ..... | 102 |
| COMMUNICATION PROBLEM                       |     |
| by John Christopher .....                   | 10  |

ALLAN M. ADAMS, *President*

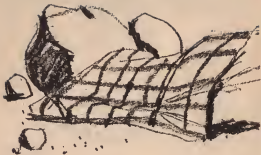
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*A colony of pioneers from earth, lost these many years on a distant planet. Only Old Pendennis can track the young ones their human heritage, and keep them from turning into savages...or worse. And Old Bendennis is dying.*

# OF HUMAN HERITAGE



Old Pendennis lay on his side, breathing heavily, trying to ease the pain in his good leg. He hitched his burned and scarred left arm, a jointed broomstick with a twisted tuft of stiffened fingers, to touch the scarred side of his face, wondering if his smile was real or a tortured horror.

"You're going home, my children," he said. "To earth."

Charleen, his granddaughter—or was she great granddaughter?—held his good hand, patting it softly. "You're going, too, Grandsire."

He tried to see her face but there was a veil, gray and amorphous, between. His eyes did that, sometimes. Clouded over with film. Often he could think it away, sometimes wipe it away with a handkerchief. But not today. He was too tired, too utterly weary with the act of dying.



It shouldn't be so hard to die, catching at shallow breaths, wincing at pain, moving heavily to ease cramped muscles. Death should have dignity and peace, not be a querulous round of petty inconveniences. Now, what had he been saying? See, even the mind fumbles. Oh, yes. "You're going back to Earth. Someday. Eventually they'll hear our signal. And you'll go home again."

Charleen squeezed his hand gently. "Not without you."

Old Pendennis feebly returned the pressure. "Of course, darling. A bit of me will go with each of you. You must remember that. It is part of our faith, our heritage."

The scarred, burned half of his face ached with the effort to smile. "But I'll be gone. Not completely gone, for there'll be something of me in each of you. It's time I go, Charleen. I'm old. Very old." He drew a shuddering breath. "How old am I, Evan? That is Evan, isn't it?"

"I'm Charles, Grandfather. Edward's boy. I think you're a hundred and ten. If the calendar is right. Father was never sure Jerry got the coordinates correct."

"Near enough. . . A hundred and ten years? . . That's a long time."

"You're the last of the Old Ones, Grandfather."

Old Pendennis smiled into his personal darkness. "A hundred and ten?" He started a chuckle but it hurt his chest. He lay back, content, for the moment just to breathe. "There was a time, Charles, when you couldn't have got odds I'd live to be twenty. Just after the ship reactor blew up. Radiation burns. . . " He tried to remember the agony and couldn't. Perhaps it was just as well that we're shielded from the past, can't carry with us its vivid horrors, just its scars. "I was one of the lucky ones."

He wondered briefly at that. Would you call it lucky to be lost in the heavens, on some uncharted planet, a leg, an arm and half a face charred and agonizing? Or would it have been better to go in that milleseccond of holocaust? A thousand had gone then. Ninety-seven, burned, screaming with pain and terror, had made the life rocket and, eventually, this lonely planet. Seventy-two of them had sur-

vived, after a fashion, twenty or more as hopeless cripples.

"We saved all we could. Even the cripples, Charles, though it would have been so easy to let them die. Possibly even merciful. And certainly better for us. But we are humans. With an immense respect for human life. That's your heritage. You, Charles, Charleen, Natalie. . ." He turned milk-blue eyes up to the dimly seen figure. "Who's here, Charles?"

"All of us, Grandfather. The whole colony, except for Evan and Walter Blake. They're at the radio, to keep the beacon steady."

"The whole colony?" He swept blank, unseeing eyes around the big room in slow, uneasy jerks. "How many?"

"Two hundred and four, counting Mabel's new twins."

"I haven't seen them, have I?"

"No, Grandfather, but they're healthy rascals, to hear them squeal."

"New life. As mine goes out."

"Don't talk like that!" Charleen spoke almost harshly.

"But it's a good thing, Charleen. New life. Continuity. Protect it, Charles. That is our human heritage. The continuity of life. Remember that. Hold to it, Charles. All of you. . ." His voice rose, but probably half of them were not hearing. "You are human. You are Earthmen though you've never seen Earth. You are men, not animals, as it would have been easy to become on this planet.

"It has been a good planet, and we have survived. The hardest part of our survival has been to remain human beings, conscious, thinking human beings. It would have been so easy. . ." Old Pendennis sank back, remembering distantly, veiled with years, hidden under other memories.

With so much pain and death around, it would have been so much simpler to let the cripples die in their misery, or even kill them. That might have solved many problems. Food was scarce and unfamiliar on this new world. There had been so little. And too much pain. Everyone, burned, scarred, battered, yet they had held on to human dignity, somehow. And to the dream of returning to earth.

He could remember the middle years better. The crude houses, plows made from scraps of the ship, and some large

man with half a beard on a burned face and the stump of a leg, exhorting them, driving them. And they had held on, dreaming of a return to Earth. Perhaps that had held them even more than just a tenacious clinging to life. After all, even animals had that.

Their descendants would go back to Earth, taking with them something of the others so that, in a sense, even the Old Ones would go home, if a ship could find them. But, if it didn't?

"This is not a bad planet. In some ways it is better than Earth. Less crowded." He almost laughed at that, the effort shaking his chest. Two hundred and four humans were the entire population of a planet. "So, even if rescue should never come, you can have a good life here so long as you remember you're human."

They were stirring restlessly. Old Pendennis could hear the sussuration of movement, here, there, small pockets of impatience. Probably the children.

He tried to sit up and failed. Charleen's arm eased him back down. "Rest, Grandsire."

"I have a long time for that, my dear, and only moments for this. Charles? You're still here?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Don't grieve for me. Because there will always be something of me in each of you, as there is something of all the others in me. A little bit of me, and of all the Old Ones, can go back with you. Or stay here forever." Old Pendennis lay back, his voice suddenly, for one last moment, clear and firm. "Remember your heritage. Remember! You are human."

Charleen closed his rheumy eyes with one hand. With the other she pulled up the blanket while her tail gently straightened his feet, the good one on top. Charles got his hind legs under him with a little clatter and stood with bowed head, two of his eyes closed, the other pair watching for the antics of the children. Myrtle was keeping her youngest quiet by scratching gently, soothingly at both its heads,

and Judy's third arm was rocking young Peter's tank where he slept, his gills scarcely moving. Evan came slithering across the floors, his front flippers clearing a way between the children. Evan's youngest threw her four skinny legs across his scaly hump and screamed in his ear.

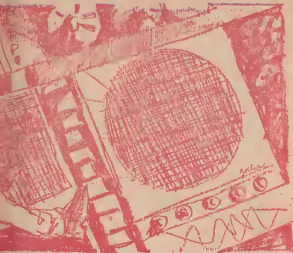
"Do we eat him now, or wait till after the funeral?"





# COMMUNICATION

*What would you do if a creature from outer space landed in your backyard? How would you communicate? What if it couldn't talk? Reverse the situation, and say an earth ship landed on another planet. What would YOU do if the aliens couldn't...or WOULDN'T...communicate?*



# PROBLEM

By 2049, when the "*Wayfarer*" was launched, interstellar travel had become something of a commonplace. Rocket motors had given way to nuclear motors, and then there had come the Ku-Tsuni space warp, through which the vast distances of the cosmos could be bridged.

Journeys still took some time, because for obvious reasons

the jumps were made well out of range of the solar systems to and from which the ships were proceeding. And although theoretically one could leap to the center of the galaxy, in fact exploration was confined to our own small corner, among a couple of hundred suns. One reason for this was that the warp's accuracy decreased with distance, providing an error on the outward flight which was more than doubled on the return.

But travel to the stars in itself was taken for granted, and the "Wayfarer" was launched as a freighter. A trickle of trade was flowing, and soon would be a flood. The "Wayfarer" was scheduled for the Rigel run. She had made three round trips before she went off course.

This happened when she encountered, in hyper-space, a sub-electronic storm. This was a hazard that was known, and not usually dangerous. Transit through the outer edges of the storm provided no more than a mild buffeting, and there were instruments to show where the storm center lay, so that avoiding action could be taken.

In this case, though, the "Wayfarer" had the bad luck to land in the storm center itself, and the worse luck that her voyage had started on the day after Burns' Night and that the duty officer was a Scot.

Don Donaldson, feeling the whole ship vibrate with the storm's hammering and seeing the control room itself wreathed in a shimmering blue electrical discharge, slammed down the emergency lever for return into normal space. The result was a random jump, to an utterly unknown destination.

The skipper, a non-drinking Swede, restrained himself with some difficulty from clubbing Donaldson to death on the spot, and considered the situation. It was bad, but could have been worse. They could have landed inside the closed gravitational field of a sun, or even in its flaming heart. Equally, they could have found themselves a hundred light-years from the nearest possible haven. As it was, they were less than a light-year from a small sun with planets.

The rules for ships lost were simple and straightforward. One found a sun, landed on a planet, and set up a beacon

which would provide a distress signal that could be picked up by other vessels traversing hyperspace. Then one sat back and waited to be traced, and for the arrival of a patrol ship with the proper co-ordinates.

The "Wayfarer" went onto nuclear drive, and headed for the bright spot on her screen. As she approached, more became clear. The sun had five planets, and the center one of these, about twice the size of the earth, showed a breathable atmosphere. This would make everything a great deal easier and pleasanter. The extra gravity would be a nuisance. But it was more than compensated for by the chance of living in the fresh air while the beacon was erected and during the several weeks that were likely to elapse before the patrol ship arrived.

They orbited the world, and the scanners mapped it. It was about half land, half water, split into four major continents and the usual scatter of islands.

The Swede started preparations for descent. These included routine checking of the retro-rockets, and this was where they had their second stroke of bad luck. The rockets were jammed, presumably as a result of the storm they had gone through. A man was sent out to inspect, and returned with the news that the damage was major: heat had welded the flaps together.

This left the Swede with a serious decision to make. It was theoretically possible to set up the beacon in space, but it would take at least ten times as long and would involve considerable hazards.

On the other hand, there was water down there, and there was the known Hansen technique for landing on watery planets without retros. The Swede didn't take long to decide. Hansen had been a Dane, and anything a Dane could do a Swede could do better.

The answer was close orbiting, followed by a screaming lateral descent, and then skipping the water like a stone skimming the surface of a pond. This provided effective braking at the cost of being roughed up by half a dozen



or more separate impact shocks. But it was nothing that the elastic landing cocoons couldn't handle.

Surveying the map the scanners had drawn up, the Captain decided that a stretch of east-west coastline near the tropics provided his safest bet. He could skim along parallel with the shore, which meant that the amphibious craft, when launched, would have no more than a mile or two to cover.

The "*Wayfarer*" did her preliminary braking in the planet's outer atmosphere, then dipped inside. Three further orbits brought her into landing position, and she screamed down as prescribed. Everything seemed right: target point, trajectory, impact velocity.

But the Captain had overlooked one extremely obvious and quite dently fact. The Hansen landings had been specified for planets of earth size or smaller. The "*Wayfarer*" would float on water under normal gravity, and float higher still under lesser gravities. But on this planet her mass was considerably greater.

Donaldson, a cautious Scot when sober, might have spotted the error. But Donaldson and the Captain were not on speaking terms. In fact, by the time Donaldson realized what was happening, it was too late for anyone to do anything.

The "*Wayfarer*" hit, gave one soggy bounce, and settled into the waves. She sank by the stern.

In the three minutes of grace afforded them, a handful of crewmen in the after part succeeded in breaking open one of the emergency hatches and launching a raft, in the shape of the long galley table. They grabbed what came to hand—foodstuffs chiefly—and clambered aboard.

Then the "*Wayfarer*" dipped, carrying all but these few into the depths.

The Captain, if he had wanted to, could have found a placid sea, but this had not seemed an important consideration. The sea in which they landed was choppy, and getting rougher, with a wind blowing onshore from the south.

The waters washed over the raft, which was only ten feet by four in size. The crewmen clung to the hope of rescue—the scanners had shown buildings, cities—but time went by and hope dwindled. First one and then another, exhausted, cold and sick, lost his precarious hold and was washed away.

Rescue, though, was on the way. The Mori, who inhabited this planet, had seen the "*Wayfarer*" as she circled. They had even roughly worked out her destination.

They were an intelligent race, centipedal in shape, now at the beginning of their own technological explosion. They had not mastered the air yet—the extra gravity did not help—but they were already keen astronomers.

The Mori recognized the "*Wayfarer*" for what she was, and launched a rescue operation immediately. This action was not entirely selfless in motive: there was no doubt in their minds that great advantages were likely to accrue from contact with a race capable of building so impressive a craft.

More than a hundred Mori ships, including a monster ocean liner, were directed or diverted to the spot. Visibility was bad, and getting worse, but hour after hour the Mori ships criss-crossed the area, hunting and finding nothing.

The spaceship, plainly, had sunk, and seemingly without trace.

Disappointed, the Mori prepared to call off the smaller vessels, since night was approaching and the Tuén would be coming up from the depths to savage anything less than fifty feet in length. The larger ships would stay, and had searchlights, but the likelihood of their finding anything at night when they had already failed by day was small.

At that point, one of the coasters saw it. A small speck hobbing on the port bow. After that, everything went quickly and smoothly.

Within twenty minutes the Mori had the raft in tow, with the solitary drenched survivor on board. He was treated with all the respect due a member of the race that had built



the great galleon which had flamed three times round the planet before plunging to its death in the waters.

This respectful treatment, however, was not entirely disinterested. If only they could establish communication with this survivor, the Mori realized untold advantages might ensue. For even if this one survivor were not himself a skilled technologist, he could provide hints which might enable breakthroughs to be made in a dozen different fields.

To this end, always with due courtesy and deference, some of the finest minds among the Mori were bent to the task: biologists, psychologists, physicists, mathematicians. All worked on the project.

They were confident it would not be long before a proper contact was established. But the weeks went by, and then the months, and the alien stayed an alien, his expression inscrutable, his mind unknown.

Six months after the rescue, the two chief Mori investigators discussed matters with Preet, who held a very senior political position in the premier nation. One was Voka, a venerable biologist. The other, Sikla, was the acknowledged world expert in applied psychology.

"There must be some line we can try," Preet said. "Mathematical, perhaps? With stones, or something. Two plus two equals four. That sort of thing."

"One of the first approaches we used," Voka said. "We thought perhaps we were being too simple, so we brought in Pudi. He tried some very subtle things, but it got us no further."

"Star maps?" Preet suggested. "Drawings of the solar system?"

"That, too. But wouldn't be likely to make much of star maps with Mora as the reference point; and he most certainly doesn't come from *this* solar system."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Positive. He's been breathing our air with no sign of distress. Therefore he comes from a planet with an atmosphere not markedly different from our own. But there's no other such planet in this system."

Preet looked sad, an expression indicated more by the rippling of his multitudinous feet than by the look on his face.

"I suppose the ship itself should have told us all this, anyway. Such power and size."

"There's one final possibility," Sikla said. He was smaller than the others, paler red in color. He scratched his words in a higher key.

"What possibility is that?" Preet asked.

"That their means of communication may be quite unlike ours. It may have nothing to do with speech, or writing, or gesture."

"Leaving what?"

"Direct mental communication."

"Telepathy?"

"Yes," Sikla said, reluctantly, as though the word offended him.

"Should we not try that?" Preet asked. "There are some who say this can happen, even among us."

"We *have* tried," Voka said. "We called in those who specialize in this so-called discipline." He rippled his legs in gloomy distaste. "We've even tried those who claim to speak with the dead."

"With no results?"

"None. But if telepathy really does exist, then in us it undoubtedly is at a very low level. He would be no more likely to make anything of it than we can of the blowings and gruntings of the Tuen."

"Have you offered him tools, equipment?"

"Yes. He is not interested."

"Do you think he could be in a state of shock still—from the landing?" Preet asked.

"If he is, then shock in his race is nothing like anything we know. He eats, and drinks, and sleeps normally, showing no distress. Look at him."

They looked, and rippled their agreement.

"So what do we do?" Preet asked.

"Nothing," said Voka. "Perhaps they'll send a rescue party for him. Perhaps that is what he's waiting for."

The whole affair had far-reaching effects on the Mori.

Their failure to communicate produced disappointment, which in turn sparked a kind of racial despair. Could a person communicate with *exogone*, in the true sense? Was not even normal language between normal Mori a sign more of failure than success?

After all attempts at communication had been abandoned, the alien was housed in quarters befitting a galactic ambassador, and offered what luxuries the Mori world could afford.

The alien spurned them all.

He lived his gracious, quiet, serene life with dignity. The example he set was impressive, and the Mori were ready to follow it. All over the planet, stock markets crashed, as the bubble of the incipient Mori affluent society was pricked and the air wheezed out. Business slowed, industry stopped growing, went into reverse, ground at last to a halt. There was social unrest, which became revolution, and revolution gave way to chaos. Famine and misery stalked the lands of Mora. In ten years, apart from a few small enclaves, they were back in the Dark Ages.

In one of the enclaves, the alien lived on. Voka and Sikla were dead of old age, and Preet had been brutally depedatized when his government was overthrown; but new guardians carried out their duties, still hoping for the great ship that might come winging through space, to rescue the alien and save the Mori from themselves.

The alien himself was contented. He had warmth, and food, and ease. It was, all in all, a good life for a ship's cat.

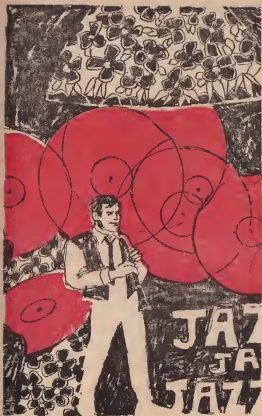


*Tommy Coxton & His Solid Six entertain at a ritzy party. The money's good, the food's fantastic, the girls are willing. But **SOMETHING** just doesn't jive. Something's wrong. Something. **SOMETHING!***

# WHIRLIGIG!

■ NOW LOOK JOE, just sit there! For the last time, I am telling you that we are going to include *Gumshoe Stumble* in our next recording session whether you like it or not! And you're going to release it as a single, and I'm going







to see that label say big and bold and clear: *Gaunchoe Stumble* by Tommy Caxton and his Solid Six. Got me?

No, *next* time won't *do*—I want the *present* band to put it down. Louie's finally getting hitched to his girl Cindy, and Alf Reardon's joining Stumpy Biggleman for his tour of Egypt, and I—

No, I *won't* shut up and I *won't* think it over and I *am* being reasonable! And I'll talk like that to you or any other A&R man in the business until I manage to get this simple plain straightforward fact through your head. Listen carefully: *we* are going to record that number and *you* are going to release it. Is that clear, or do I have to get a hot poker and write it on your—uh—?

I've already told you, Goddammit! I know perfectly well there's an lcky Black version and one by Buck Milligan *and* one by Benny Gail! I *know* there's no future in covering an lcky Black disc. But there's absolutely and positively no future in *not* recording—

Oh, to hell with it. Let me get a cigarette and let me get my breath back. I guess I'll have to tell you the whole story, though I'm damned sure you won't believe a word of it.

Listen, you know Nick Barelli? Used to run the Crypt Club near Marble Arch until that time when—uh—well, until the word got around and nobody would play the joint for a million. That's him. Well, after the club went broke I felt sort of it was my fault and a bit guilty and...anyway I did him a few favors and now he's back on his feet he tries to do me a few in return.

Well, the other day he gives me a buzz and says have you an evening free next week because I have a good gig for your band. So I say how about Wednesday and he covers the phone and I wait and he comes back after a few minutes and says great, Wednesday it is and how do I feel about a hundred and fifty and expenses for a four-hour stint at a big society do?

Right there I should have spotted something fishy. I mean, what kind of a society function is it where the date de-

depends on whether you can get the band that night? But I hadn't any mind to spare for that question. I was wondering whether I liked a hundred and fifty smackers and expenses more than I hated swank society parties. I mean, last time we'd played one, there was this louse who called Fats Hamilton a big buck nigger and Fats got so mad he learned the guy's name and went in the toilet and drew a picture four feet high with lipstick all over the wall and wrote the name underneath. I guess I better hadn't say what he'd drawn the guy doing. But we won't be booked into that joint again.

So I tried to get some more details out of Nick. But all I learned was the guy's name—Mister Mordecai Smith—and the tone of voice Nick used to say *Mister* sort of smelt like money burning and meant make up your mind fast he could have Ted Heath instead. So I said okay, where is this show? He says vaguely it's out of town somewhere and goes off the line for another minute or two. Finally he comes back to say the guy who's hiring us will provide his own transport and bring us home afterwards.

Now this is even odder. Most people wouldn't soil their limousines with a musician's hind end, so we have this minibus arrangement with back seats that turn into bunks and a compartment in the roof where you can put the horns even when it's snowing, and besides we like using it because it has this slogan of Alf's painted on the back—YOU ARE FOLLOWING TOMMY CAXTON'S SOLID SIX, WHY NOT CATCH US SOME TIME? And so on. So I argue. So Nick wins.

Or rather, he drives it through my head that Mister Mordecai Smith is the kind of guy who prefers his own ideas, even if they're bad ones. So okay. All fixed for Wednesday, they collect us at six-thirty outside Nick's office and take us home to our own pads after. We all live close to one another, but even so when we chew the facts over afterwards the only one we really like is the rate for the job.

Still, I wasn't too worried. Not till I showed on Wednes-

day as agreed, and here's Nick with all the boys barring Ed—bass, you know? There's some sort of argument going on with Louie Dillon, my clarinetist. I get the drift. He wants to take Cindy along as usual, who's standing there looking bored, and Nick is saying Mister Smith wouldn't like it and in fact positively forbade it, and in the interests of band discipline—what we have of it, but who'd want to lose it completely—I come in on Nick's side.

Why the hell not take Cindy, Louie says. Look, there's room in those things for a small army! And he points across the road to where there's two cars waiting, with a couple of uniformed shovers sort of tapping their fingers on the wheels.

I do a doubletake. What the blazes are those is what I want to know! And Bill Sandler, our pianoman, who's a car buff, takes me literally and says that's one Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost and one Hispano-Suiza eight-passenger limousine weighing two tons and built like a tank and that's Mister Smith's transport and it's *beautiful*.

Still, even though Louie's right about the small army Nick is right about Mister Smith, and I say so. So Louie says to Nick in no uncertain terms he wants to know who this vestpocket dictator is, anyway!

Matter of fact, that's something we'd all like to know, so we turn the codfish eye on Nick, and he goes all Italian and helpless and all he can say is the guy turned up and asked for our band, which he had the name of in a notebook with him, and this was some sort of rare alligator binding on the notebook, and he was dressed bet magnificently and had these rings dripping from his fingers and a whole squad of private secretaries and such dancing around and if we wanted to see our pay we'd better get in those cars!

So Ed shows up just then, apologizing—he has this Mini-Minor and the most overgrown bass I ever saw, and some trouble with the roof-rack or something... Anyway, time's running out, and I have no choice but to come the heavy father and tell Louie Cindy doesn't come, and everyone else

tells him to shut up and get in because it's brass-monkey weather and Cindy says what she thinks of Mister Smith and beats it and that's that.

Now we find out the showers are as weird as their cars. I mean, did you ever see a car with a clock in the middle of the steering-wheel? Bill says it's an eight-day stopwatch, but I think Big Ben pupped the week the thing left the factory. I—no, that's not what I started to say. Here these two showers just sit watching us struggle with the instruments, not making a move to help, more sort of hoping the strain will kill us. Well, this gets Alf Reardon down, of course—he doesn't like people who think musicians are an inferior species. I keep him quiet for a bit, and we climb in, and then Fats wants to know where we're going. He asks me. I say hell, I don't know, ask the shower!

And the shower sneers and slams the door and off we go.

Well, with a chance to sit back and think I'm frowning till my forehead feels like corrugated paper. We don't know where we're going. I haven't seen the guy who hired us, Alf is bloody-minded about the shower and vice versa, and the general feeling is Tommy are you off your bonce to get us mixed up in this? I am not happy, believe me.

Still, we cool down, and Fats passes a jar of rum which normally I wouldn't allow on the way to this sort of function—not after the episode of the picture in the gents—but I figure Alf's halfway right and we aren't going to be treated like royalty so why behave like it?

Some time around when it gets dark, I look out the back for the second car following us, and I yell. And so do the others. Here, so help me, since we last paid any mind to the outside world, a fog's blown up so thick and black you can't see a yard out of the window, and here's this crazy driver poring on the coal like high noon in midsummer.

So I bash the glass partition, and the shower picks up one of those real speaking-tube things, you know? And he says in an upper-crust voice something about no need to be alarmed, *gentlemen*, this is only a patch of mist, and

the words come out all echoing and hollow. Fats grabs his jar of rum back from Bill, and while he's still gulping, the shover turns out to be right and here we are, pulling up a concrete driveway outside a monstrous great country mansion yea long by yea tall.

Like wow! says Ed. But there's no time to take in the view—here comes a stinking-rich-looking character surrounded by flunkies and monkeys and alongside him a girl like ...like... Oh, I'll save my breath. She was just unbelievable, all the way down from her coal-black hair to her... Never mind. What I mean, you could hear eyes popping like champagne corks.

So I say, Mister Mordecai Smith? And kick Louie on the shin to tell him he might as well stop preening himself, who looks at musicians in this class of joint except nymphos going slumming? I have a good kick which means that. I have to use it on Louie all the time.

He says yes, and he is very gracious and glad to see us arrived safely and trusts we will spend an enjoyable evening and this here is his daughter Galena whose birthday party it is we've been engaged for.

So Galena takes my hand and holds it and looks at me and says are you *really* Tommy Caxton and I have *all* your records and it'll be *wonderful* having you actually playing at my party. And I suddenly think maybe I was wrong in the way I'd kicked Louie and I ought to have made it one of my ordinary keep-your-hands-off-or-I'll-tell-Cindy kicks.

Because this kid has eyes that you look deep, deep down into, like hotel corridors, and all the signs say with no chance of error—BEDROOM.

I gulp. I nod. I look at Mister Smith, expecting him to throw me right back in the car. But no. He says about seeing to his guests and looking forward to hearing our music and this particular flunkey out of all of them will take charge of us.

And before we've quite recovered we've been processed with assembly-line efficiency through a small room where

we get a chance to comb the hair and tune up, and we're on.

Jesus! From the size of the house I'd expected a big room, but this was a stadium! The dais they put us on would have held a symphony orchestra for a start, and all it held was a half-dozen chairs, a Steinway grand—Bill said it had a very stiff action, but maybe they didn't want a jazzman beating hell out of a good piano—and us.

And over the edge of this football-field we were on, there were the people. They...

Now look. Put yourself in our place. Here's this crazy barn, laid out with long white tables for bars and buffets, barmen in white jackets, drinks flowing like water, and this gang of more handsome men and more beautiful women of all ages from chicks to hens than I ever saw in my life—and I've played for the judging at Miss Europe contests! And their *clothes*!

The women's were pretty much okay. I mean, I didn't think in a setting like this you'd see the sack line and the trapeze line and the A-line and the H-line and the god-knows-line all together, skirts all the way from the floor to the knee, bosoms all the way from over-exposed to under-developed. But—hell, it was the men that bugged me. Some were in evening dress that didn't fit. Some wore tartan jackets and tight pants like army mess-dress. Some wore tweed jackets of every shade from orange to blue. Some wore ruffled shirts. Some—oh, I can't remember the lot.

Anyway, there wasn't time to look the scene over. Because here comes little Galena bouncing with excitement—I didn't notice what *she* was wearing, but there wasn't much of it—and this string of young men pinker-faced and slicker-built than Guards officers and dressed like blitz victims. Charges up to the stand and waits, like breathless, for us to start.

So I start. What else?

I stomp off a nice rousing opener—*Rampart Street*.

Galena listens. Some of the other people move to the far end, where I doubt if they can hear our triple-forte. Some ignore us. Some come and look us over the way squares always do. I call it the aquarium look. Only Galena hangs on our every note, and her boy-friends stay put, hanging on her.

Well, we play an hour and a half, and Smith sends to say there's refreshments for the band and we may take up to forty minutes before resuming if we wish. We wish, all right. I guess I shouldn't admit it, but with Galena's melting eyes on me I've been putting the band through hoops. All our best numbers, all the toughies and the flag-wavers and the soulful blues one inch this side of corny, Galena standing there like I was Gabriel.

And when she says how much she's enjoying the music, and *looks*, I know very well that there's refreshment for the band-leader waiting somewhere—uh—private.

Maybe it was the Gabriel bit that put me off. I have personal reasons. Anyway, I didn't bite. I went off with the boys to the room behind the stand.

There's salad and smoked salmon and canapes and some wine I don't recognize and white-jacketed waiters to serve us, and all this makes even Alf feel a bit less sore. We sit around, eat, drink, light up and swap impressions. One impression we share: this joint is the weirdest. The waiters don't help, either. They're as uncommunicative as the show-ers.

Suddenly I notice something, and push my chair back. Where—is—Louie?

I'd seen him slip away, but I'd figured on doing the same before going back on the stand, and assumed the obvious reason. Only the obvious reason doesn't take twenty-five minutes.

Hmmm...

I get up, asking Bill which door, and he points, and a waiter opens for me and says to go to the end of the corridor. Some corridor. All white, with a springy floor. From one side of it rises a—get this—an escalator. And

something else odd. No lights. The light comes from everywhere. Poppa Mordecai's fortune obviously has several more zeroes than I first thought.

But anyway, what strikes me most is the piped music, which I can hear out here and couldn't in the room where we were eating. Very odd piped music. It bothers me all the time I'm in the john.

Because it sounds like a very old, crackly, scratchy 78, and I know damn well it's not. It's a track from a perfectly good new LP, by yours truly and his Solid Six, and a fan of mine as devoted as Galena has no business playing it in this condition. I mean, hell, she *must* be devoted. She's not satisfied with having her pop spend the cost of a hundred LP's to get us to her party—apparently she wants to hear us through the interval too.

And then, just as I'm coming back past the foot of the escalator, everything stops. There's a pause in the piped music, a scraping as the stylus picks up on a new disc, and a band goes into *Gumshoe Stumble*, also with scratches and crackling.

MY BAND!

Jesus, I've played with Louie and Alf for years. I *knew* that was Alf's tram growling in there. I *knew* it was Louie coddling around with those high-register squeaks. And most definitely of all I knew my own trumpet lead.

But I'd played *Gumshoe Stumble* so few times I could practically count them! We hadn't even played it this evening, and sure as hell we'd never cut a disc of it. So where did Galena get that recording?

I figured I'd come through the only door Louie would have been sent through. He wasn't in the can. That left the escalator. I put two and Galena together and hoped. I was right.

This escalator starts by throwing me at a blank wall. Only suddenly it's not. It's a door, opened like a conjuring trick.

Here's this room, beautiful mother-of-pearl walls, spongy sea-green floor, furniture like—but I didn't see that in detail. I saw three things in detail. A record player, so old



its wooden cabinet had wormholes in it and the veneer was cracked. Galena, making bedroom eyes. And Louie, so besotted he hadn't even caught on to what was happening.

I scrambled up and grabbed the record off the player. I made Louie read the label. I never saw anyone go so white. He clutches his beard, he looks at Galena like a rattlesnake, and then he and I bent each other to the door. I dropped the record. It broke, I guess.

Because while we're running down the escalator bawling to be let out of here Galena lets go a howl fit to lift the roof and we hear some of what she thinks about the way we treat her precious antiques.

*Yes, I said antiques!* She screamed it right out loud after us. She'd decided to give her living doll a treat, so she'd got out her genuine unique original discs, and that one I dropped—according to her—was *five hundred years old*.

We spoiled her birthday party, and Poppa Mordecai was sore as hell. He'd gone to a lot of trouble, like making the guests dress up in period so we wouldn't catch on, and hauling those cars out of maybe a museum someplace. But that was just the half of it. *I* think he must have bent the law to swing the deal at all. I mean, if it wasn't illegal we'd be hearing about it all the—

Joe! Put that phone down! I'm not crazy! I'm just explaining why it's absolutely essential we cut a disc of *Gamshee Stumble* and...







*The time; Six months from now. You're an astronaut in a capsule, hurtling around the earth at incredible speeds. Suddenly, there's a power failure. And all you have to bring you down safely is the calm, sultry voice of the girl at Control Center.*

# TALK TO ME, SWEETHEART

■ WHOEVER SHE WAS, she was magnificent.

"Come on sweetheart, talk to me. Keep the words coming."

Her voice was perfectly calm when it had no right to be. "Your oxygen reserves are 78 percent depleted. Control-jet fuel is 63 percent depleted. It will be necessary for you to re-enter on the next orbit. Capsule attitude appears satisfactory; drift rates are minimal. Have you experienced any difficulty in controlling your drift?"

"Some," I said. "Been using manual controls since the accident."

"Are you overriding the automatic controls?"

"Nothing to override. The automatics have been dead for two orbits now."

The radio was silent for half a second. Then her careful, precise voice sounded in my earphones again. "Radar and telemetry data are now being analyzed. You will be beyond direct radio contact within 90 seconds. While you are mak-

ing your final orbit, all positional and performance data will be scanned, and a final retro and re-entry sequence formulated. Direct radio contact with Cape Command will be re-established when you appear above the local horizon once more. That will be in . . . 89 minutes, 11 seconds."

"Okay sweetheart, see you then."

I squinted through the observation periscope and watched the long flat sweep of Florida quickly sliding into the haze of the horizon. Then I looked up through the capsule's viewpoint at the cluster of solar batteries mounted on the other skin, and the ugly scar the meteor had left. It looked like a 20-millimeter shell had grazed the capsule.

Could have been worse, I guess. But I could feel the perspiration still trickling down my flanks, despite the suit's air-conditioning.

*Don't kid yourself, I thought. Your tail is still on the griddle. Nobody can land an orbiting capsule blind, no matter how much help they give you from the ground.*

Then I reminded myself of the girl down there at Cape Command, that radio voice that was feeding me the information that my dead instruments could no longer provide. She was doing a helluva job. All that a human being could be expected to do, and then some. She was my eyes now. She was my link with the rest of the world, and her radio-beamed voice was my pathway back to safety.

It was quite a voice, too. A brunette's voice, I judged: quiet, vibrant, unruffled when most women would have been reduced to tears and hysterics. Her voice had a subtle alto quality—warm, rich, reassuring.

So I sat in the capsule and watched the world go round, waiting for the final minutes of re-entry. The moments of truth. Either that girl and I lined up this orbiting ashean exactly right—and I mean perfectly correctly exactly right—or Samuel Jay Roberts would burn to a fine ash, just like a falling star.

I could hear Ridge's voice echoing in my memory: "And you expect a frail human being, with reflexes 10,000 times slower than an electronic relay's, to cope with an emergency

in orbit?"

Would the girl be able to handle all the simultaneous problems of reentry? She would have all the information that a world-wide network of men and machines could provide, but could she juggle it all and come up with the right words at the right time? And would I be able to react fast enough to her instructions? Of all the emergencies that we had foreseen and trained against, no one had expected a situation like this. Could a girl on the ground replace the instruments I needed in the capsule? Two frail human beings, she and I. I could see Ridge sadly shaking his head. Two slow, fallible human beings.

*That's all you've got, I told myself.*

It was supposed to be a routine orbital flight. My fifth, and according to Space Administration policy, my last. I would be the third retired astronaut in the country.

"It's a waste of fuel to send you along," Ridge told me as they outlined the mission. Ridge was coordinating the manned flights. "You're going to be sitting there doing nothing, while a bunch of astronomical cameras take pictures of the sun. Automatically."

"Then why put this mission into a manned flight?" I asked, more to nettle him than anything else.

He made a sour face. "Those astronomers—you know them, ultra-cautious. They want a man aboard in case something goes wrong with the cameras. Which won't happen, of course."

"So you're going along for a needless ride. And we'll have to carry oxygen, air conditioning equipment, recovery systems, emergency systems, and all the extra propellants to lift that junk, plus your own pudgy carcass. What a waste." He shook his head like a man who possessed a great truth that no one would listen to.

The preparations for the flight went along well enough. A couple of delays, but nothing to worry about. Everybody went about their jobs in workmanlike fashion.

This was nothing like the early days, a few years ago,

when manned orbital flights were hot news. Now there were no live TV broadcasts, no swarms of newsmen, no Congressmen or captains of industry at the Cape to watch the drama of it all. It was just work—satisfying, rewarding work to those of us who believed in it. But, satisfying or not, most of it was drudging routine.

That's when the blonde from Time/Life arrived on the scene. It was a surprise to see somebody from a big news-magazine at the pad. But since she was young, and blonde, and built well enough to cause a two-hour hold in any man's countdown, we didn't discourage her. Not at all.

I thought that since I was one of the few unmarried astronauts, and the next man due for a mission, that I would have a pretty clear field with her. Not that the married guys didn't make their plays. But then Ridge unfurled his grandiloquent title of Operations Coordinator for Manned Orbital Missions, and she seemed mightily impressed.

The upshot of it all was that the three of us—Ridge, the blonde and I—wound up at the bar of the Vanguard Motel a few nights before the launch. Both Ridge and I had a mission profile all planned out in the backs of our healthy, red-blooded, American boy-type minds.

"I'm really so new on Time/Life that I hardly know what to do," she said, then sipped daintily on a frozen daquiri.

Ridge smiled his gray-templed, rugged, pipe-clenching, father-image smile. "We didn't expect a staff member from an important newsmagazine. We're flattered." Ridge used the word "we" like Louis XVI.

"Well," she said, between sips, "I started on the staff last month. I wanted to do something on my own, so I asked my editor if I could come down here to Canaveral and do a human interest story."

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

She smiled at me. "Well, I don't know for certain. I didn't realize that any of the astronauts were unmarried. Maybe we could do a sort of biographical sketch?"

*And write a couple of brand-new chapters during the next few weeks,* I thought. Aloud, I answered, "That would be fine."

Then Ridge chimed in. "Actually, there's been so much written about the astronauts during the past few years that it's getting to be pretty stale stuff. Don't you think so?"

Before she could do more than open her mouth, he went on, "Why don't you write about the really fascinating part of this business—the machines that make space flight possible?"

"Oh?"

"Certainly—the computers, the miniaturized control components, the thousands of miles of wiring and thousands of tons of equipment that remain right here on the ground. And if you want *real* human interest—and something new—it's in the blockhouse and the command center during a countdown and flight. The man in the capsule has been getting all the glamor, but actually all he does is sit there. All the work is done on the ground, both before the flight and during it."

"Really, Dr. Ridgley?" She was starting to believe him.

"Now wait a minute," I said. "The whole purpose of the space flight program is to get men into orbit and eventually onto the moon and the planets."

Ridge shrugged. "Yes, men will be camping on the moon some day, but I'm certain that they'll find it too inhospitable to stay there. Automatic equipment will 'live' on the moon, and automated probes will make the interplanetary flights."

"Nonsense. . . ."

"I'm not kidding," he insisted, keeping his eyes on the blonde. "Sam, you'd be amazed at the latest computers and electronic gadgetry they're turning out. Why, right here on the Cape we've got machines that can do almost everything human beings can do. . . and do it better and faster, too."

"Horse. . . feathers," I grumbled. But before I could say anything else, Ridge called a waiter over to our table and ordered another round of drinks.

And so it went, for hours. I tried to build up the astronauts' role in space, and Ridge kept insisting that we were merely tourists in capsules, while the machines did all the hard work. The real working men, he claimed, performed



their dramatic and noble labor in the obscurity of the blockhouse. The drinks kept coming, and the argument grew hotter.

"Dammit Ridge," I said, "even the first manned orbital shot we made would have been a flop if Glenn wasn't in the capsule. Machines simply can't cope with unexpected emergencies that arise..."

"And you expect a frail human being, with reflexes 10,000 times slower than an electronic relay's, to cope with an emergency in orbit?" he shot back.

"Hell yes. Us frail human beings have been doing all right up there."

"Certainly...with a ton of equipment in the capsule, and a few hundred million dollars worth of computers, radars, tracking stations, and associated systems on the ground. You guys are like babies in a womb. You can't do a damned thing for yourselves."

I got up from chair. "Dr. Ridgley," I said, being careful not to sway too much while I stood there, "you are full of crap. If orbital flights are so damned easy, how come you've never been invited to go on one? Huh?"

He took the pipe from his teeth and grinned at me. "Simply because I'm needed where the work is done...at the command center, and in the blockhouse."

I had the option of inviting him to a fistfight or stalking out of there alone. Either way was an admission of defeat.

But the blonde broke the tension. "My goodness, I had no idea it was so late. I'll have to get to sleep."

Ridge immediately turned his attention to her. "So soon? I was hoping to show you the Cape by moonlight. It would make a good background—for your story."

She shook her pretty head. "Oh, I couldn't. Not while I'm on a story. If I don't get a good night's sleep I'm simply worthless the next day. Perhaps after the flight we can...relax a bit." She looked up at me when she said it.

"Okay," Ridge said quickly. "That's a date."

The mission was scheduled for three days later. A weather hold and a slight malfunctioning of a gyro pushed X-hour back two more days. By the time I crawled into the capsule for the flight, I had forgotten the argument. But not the blonde.

And now here I was. I had to admit it, sitting in the capsule without my instruments, I was as helpless as an unborn child. But Ridge must have been equally impotent, down at the command center. I could just see the whole gang of them down there, scrambling around, trying to figure what to do during this one emergency they hadn't foreseen. And the blonde was there, too, watching them and listening to me.

The only person who was doing anything of value now was that girl, whoever she was. I wondered how they settled on her to run the show. She certainly wasn't in the regular chain of command.

"Capsule 18, this is Control Center." *Her* voice again. She must have been relaying it from one tracking station to another. I was passing over Australia now, I judged from the elapsed flight time.

"Eighteen. Go ahead."

"Your re-entry sequence will be guided from this Center and communicated to you by voice link. The first operations in the sequence will be initiated as you pass over Hawaii. That will be approximately 17 minutes from now. Each operation must be performed precisely and exactly in the sequence you receive by voice radio. Do you understand?"

"I will initiate re-entry operations according to the sequence I receive by voice radio," I repeated.

"Correct. Re-entry sequencing will begin in exactly 16 minutes, 20 seconds from the mark..." I leaned forward and touched the stopwatch on the console. Thankfully, it was separately powered and still working. "MARK."

I punched the stopwatch and then set it for 16:20.

"Okay sweetheart," I said. "You just keep talking and we'll have dinner together when I get back to the Cape."

The radio went silent. I looked through the periscope and saw nothing but empty Pacific. Now to sweat out the final

minutes. Nothing to do but wait, and then . .

"Capsule 18." *Her* again.

"Go ahead."

"Latest weather report in the recovery area shows excellent conditions: 10 percent cloud cover, 12-knot winds, three-foot waves."

"Thanks for the good words."

She was quite a girl, all right. Trying to keep up my morale.

*What does she look like?* I wondered. Can you tell a girl's looks by her voice? The blonde from Time/Life certainly sounded like a young, kittenish blonde. But . . . girl—this radio voice. . . hard to tell. She sounded brunette. Tall maybe. A mathematician obviously; good mental reflexes, and an iron control of her physical ones, I realized.

I tried to remember all the girls I had seen at the Command Center during the last few weeks. There were so many new people constantly coming and going that I had stopped paying attention to them long ago. But one of them was the girl who owned this radio voice. She was probably the quiet kind. Sensible. The kind a man could get lost with in the middle of Manhattan. Not the outdoor, Los Angeles type of girl. No. The Manhattan kind. Brunette. Tall. A beautiful voice."

I wanted very much to meet that girl. Not merely to get back to Earth safely. I wanted to meet her, and get to know her. Can you fall in love with a voice?

"Capsule 18."

"Right here, sweetheart."

"You are to test the attitude control jets. The telemetry receivers here are recording your performance. Fire the yaw control jets for one second, first left and then right."

I slid my hand down the panel of manual controls and touched the yaw control button while my eyes locked on the stopwatch. I could feel the capsule away, its slight motion magnified to my senses because of the weightlessness.

My powerless instruments remained blank, but I knew that the telemetry instruments, buried behind the control

panel, were recording the capsule's performance and sending the data back automatically by coded radio signals. The nearest tracking station would pick up the message and relay it to the Cape.

There was some hesitation on the voice radio, then I heard her say, "Telemetry receivers indicate that the yaw control jets performed satisfactorily. Now fire the pitch jets for one second."

We went through the same routine for the pitch jets, and finally the roll jets. They all seemed to be in working order. But how far could we trust the telemetry system? Suppose the meteor hit had damaged them in some way, too slightly to knock them out completely, yet enough to make them inaccurate?

*Don't give yourself a case of the "What If's,"* I warned myself. *Things are bad enough as is.*

"You are now at minimal range from the Hawaii tracking station. Capsule orientation for retrofire will be initiated."

*This is it.*

She gave me a series of precise instructions. My hands flicked along the buttons that fired the control jets. My eyes stayed glued on the clock. With her orders to guide me, I turned the capsule into the tail-high position for firing the retrorockets that would slow me down enough to break out of orbit.

"Are the automatic retrofire controls go?"

"No," I answered, with a glance at the baleful red light glaring alongside the AUTO RETROFIRE switch.

"You will fire the retrorockets manually then."

"Okay."

Before I reached the proper position in the orbit to fire the braking rockets, she needed confirmation that the capsule was lined up at the proper angle. She had to work against time to get the necessary verification from the tracking radars and theodolite telescopes at Hawaii. If I fired the retros too late, I would overshoot the recovery area; if the capsule was incorrectly aligned, I might overshoot

anyway—or I might re-enter at too steep an angle and burn.

"Your capsule attitude appears good," her voice said at last, unhurried and still outwardly calm. "Retrofire will be initiated manually on the mark. . .five, four, three, two, one, MARK."

I punched the button, thinking, *She got the information with only five seconds to spare. Close. Too damned close.*

The jolt of the retros was a shock. They seemed to be blasting right on the small of my back.

"Retrofire," I yelled into the helmet microphone.

"Retrofire confirmed," her voice came back. "California and Texas tracking stations will plot your speed and trajectory. Stand by for further instructions."

We were committed now. I was coming in, either to land safely or to burn like a meteor.

I sat there and waited for her next set of instructions. The clock was crawling.

"Retrofire appears satisfactory to within tolerable limits," she said at last.

"Glad to hear it."

"You will now re-orient the capsule to re-entry attitude."

I nodded and listened to her. The control jets again seemed to work all right, although I had to use an awful lot of fuel making the necessary corrections by hand. Finally we had the capsule lined up in the low-angle, tail-first position, so that the heat shield would take the brunt of the re-entry shock and heating.

"Have you jettisoned the retro package?" she asked.

I had forgotten to. "Doing it now. . ."

I punched the JETT RETRO button and the spent retro rockets were flung loose. The capsule bounced and weaved.

"Pitch down," she said immediately.

"Uh-huh."

"You overcorrected. You must come up slightly."

I barely tickled the control-jet button. "How's that?"

"Telemetry indicates your position is good. Confirmation by tracking systems will be attempted."

*They'll never get confirmation in time,* I thought. I no-

ticed that the cabin was getting warm. Peak heating was due soon.

"What's my internal temperature reading?"

"No time for reading," she answered quietly.

"Sorry." Damned fool. She must be busier than a missionary in a nudist camp.

I was really sweating now, and starting to feel gee-forces.

"You will undergo peak heating in approximately..." Her voice faded out. Radio blackout. The capsule was covered with a layer of air so hot that it blocked radio signals.

She came back again. "Your altitude is 100,000 feet."

"Check. Radio blackout is over."

The murderous deceleration was squashing me into the seat.

All of a sudden Ridge's voice broke in, excited and loud, "We can see you, Sam! You're streaking over the Cape right now!"

"Your altitude is 50,000 feet," she said calmly. "Deploy parachutes manually."

I banged the PAR DPLY button and looked up at the viewport. It was really "up" again, now that the weightlessness of orbit was ended. The small drogue chute billowed out, and within seconds the main chute blossomed over me. I've never seen anything so beautiful.

"Main chute open. All recovery systems green. Get those 'copters moving, I don't feel like swimming today."

By the time they pulled me out of the ocean, the reaction had set in. I was too damned weak to get out of the capsule by myself. A half-dozen grinning sailors had to help me, after the helicopter had deposited the capsule on the deck of the aircraft carrier.

They took a week to de-brief me. But through all the questions and tests, I kept envisioning that girl at the Command Center. What was she doing while I was sitting here in the Bahamas repeating my story to psychiatrists and engineers? Was she getting congratulations? Was she the object of much attention? I had to get to her.

Finally they flew me back to the Cape. Ridge and the blonde were at the airfield to meet me.

"I was worried about you, Sam old sport," Ridge said as we slid away from the plane in his convertible.

"It was a marvelous piece of piloting," the blonde cooed.

"I simply must have the first interview with you, before any of the other press people get you."

I ignored her. "I want to see the girl in the Control Center," I told Ridge.

"Thought you would," he answered, grinning.

"She's quite a girl," I mused. Then, seeing Ridge sitting there, I remembered our argument. "We human beings did all right, eh? Thought we were too frail to handle emergencies in orbit?"

He shrugged good-naturedly. "You flew a good mission, boy. But you had plenty of help."

"You said it! That girl was. . . magnificent. Unbelievable."

He nodded. "That she is."

The blonde piped up. "My editor wired me instructions to get an exclusive interview with you before your press conference tomorrow. I thought perhaps this evening we could have dinner together and. . ."

"Make it tomorrow," I said. "I'm going to be busy tonight, getting acquainted with somebody."

We pulled up at the Command Center Building. I hopped out of the car and then had to wait, like an impatient school kid, for Ridge to get out and take the blonde by the hand.

Up the steps we went. Ridge led the way, since it had been months since I'd been inside the Center and the place was always being reorganized and changed around. He brought us to an impressive room marked ORBITAL FLIGHT COMPUTATIONS. It was crammed with massive computer consoles, with only narrow aisle between them. Here at the entryway stood a small control desk, studded with switches.

"As I was saying about a week ago," Ridge remarked, "the men in the capsules are almost entirely helpless with-

out the aid of the really fascinating machinery we've developed. This computer, for example..."

"Cut the lecture," I snapped. "Where's the girl?"

Ridge shrugged and walked over to the control desk. He touched one switch.

The tape drums in the nearest console started spinning.

"Good afternoon, Commander Roberts."

The voice. *Her* voice.

"I have been programmed to offer my congratulations on your successful flight. I am glad that I was able to assist you."

"You?" I said. And then I realized that I was talking to the machine.

"Fascinating devices," Ridge said. "Simply fascinating. And they can do things that no human being can do—like think faster and make decisions better. Besides that, they can be built to talk."

I stood there staring at the mammoth computer. Behind me, I could hear Ridge laughing as he took the blonde out of the room, down the hall, outside and into his car.







# 5432

*Your  
husband's been  
acting awfully strange.  
Little things. But  
they add up.  
And then you  
discover his  
horrifying secret.*

As his secretary stepped into his quietly furnished office, Christopher Ramsgard felt a moment of dizziness. He placed his palms tightly against the edge of his desk.

"Are you feeling all right, Mr. Ramsgard?"

"Oh, yes, Sue. Just—" He felt steady again and smiled at her pretty image. "I'm fine."

"I have Mr. Wilkens' presentation here."

He took the carefully typed pages and turned to gaze out a window at the bridge crossing a very gray San Francisco Bay with its tiny white craft bobbing in the distance. He was a large man whose face had remained smooth despite

his 43 years; his blond hair was as thick as it ever had been. His pale blue eyes finally scanned over the words that Wilkens, the young and newly hired copywriter, had chosen for a small trucking company which had asked rather desperately to be represented by Bell and Ramsgard. His attention focused on an underlined phrase, "*Truck On Down To Terrywell's.*"

He looked up at the girl. "What did you think of that slogan? Corny, wouldn't you say?"

"Well—" the girl said diplomatically.

"On the other hand, perhaps wise. There's a need for ten-percent junk, in our civilization. That's the intake, over the long haul. The problem here is—will junk appeal to the customers Terrywell's wishes to attract? Are they the ten percent who prefer the junk message?"

"I always thought it was ninety percent who liked junk, Mr. Ramsgard."

He looked at her with penetrating eyes. "Do you think our messages have been ninety-percent junk, in the past?"

Her pale young face colored. "Well, I didn't mean that, Mr. Ramsgard."

"Quite all right. I said in the *haul long*, Sue."

"The which?"

He paused. "I mean, in the long haul." He smiled again, reflectively, thinking of Harry Bell, his senior partner, who had taught him most of the advertising philosophies he knew and who had died six months ago. He had missed Harry badly—probably more than anyone else living; Harry had been a widower, with no children. But he'd been left with Harry's knowledge of this business. "The old chestnut, Sue. You can fool some of them all of the time, all of them part of the time, but you can't fool all of them all of the time."

"Yes, sir."

He nodded, then returned the papers to the girl. "Tell Wilkens to go ahead."

"He'll be very pleased."

"But tell him to change that slogan to, 'On Down To Terrywell's Truck.'"

The girl looked at him closely. "On Down To Terrywell's

*Truck?"*

"Has a touch better sound, don't you think?"

"It's—different."

"Have a good morning, Sue."

Her eyes flickered. "Thank you, sir."

The small gold-and-leather electric clock on Ramsgard's desk indicated 3:26 in the afternoon.

Ramsgard lived in a large modern home on the west edge of Palo, south of the City. When his train arrived at the small Southern Pacific station at 6:30 that evening, Jenine was standing beside the new Porsche. She was only a year younger than he, but she too had retained a graceful, youthful appearance. Ramsgard smiled, seeing her dark, chic beauty. As he strode from the station, he was thinking that luck was the difference between complete or partial success. He'd been luckier than most during his life, especially with Jenine. From the time he'd first seen her in the Theta House at the University of Nebraska, until this moment early in a cooling autumn evening in Palo Alto, he'd had no regrets.

"You look like you're just starting out instead of quitting," she said.

"Enough true," he said, kissing her cheek lightly. He held the door for her, then got behind the wheel.

"Enough true? We're getting fancy with the language."

"Work with it all the time. What's new?"

"Simon had kittens."

"Figures. She was goddamn pregnant when I left, this morning. How many?"

"Six."

"On a percentage basis, we don't know enough people in the world to count on placing six kittens."

"You'll have to develop a special sales campaign."

"I'll work on it. What else?"

"Letter from Charlie. He's unhappy with our dear alma mater."

Ramsgard considered their eighteen-year-old son whom he'd sent off to Lincoln to enroll at their old college and pledge the SAE house, as he had. Charlie had always been a

kid who'd liked to stay home. He'd wanted to stay home this fall and enroll at Stanford. But despite Jenine's subtle support of her son, he'd got him onto a plane and off to Nebraska. He loved that boy, but he wanted him to feel life out alone, for a change. "What about?"

"It seems there was one sweet drunken party right after they pledged him. He is very disillusioned."

"Well, nothing's changed since I was there. Now is the time for him to become disillusioned—not when he strikes forty."

"Only slightly. I hope." She looked at him as he drove a palm-lined street in the growing darkness. "Good day?"

"Very. Wilkens got up his first presentation, for the Terrywell account. Worked out a slogan. Try it. 'On Down to Terrywell's Truck.'"

She tried it for several seconds, looking at him again. "Well, it's—different."

The driveway to the house ran off a quiet avenue into three acres owned by Ramsgard. A white-stone wall, which Charlie had built two summers ago, fronted the property. Behind was a smooth, sloping lawn from which grew several oaks, two digger pines and Ramsgard's prized pair of madroña trees. Two street lamps and the lighting from above the doors of the garage made the broad windows glisten; the swimming pool caught the reflection of an early moon.

Ramsgard stopped the Porsche at the mouth of the drive, then carefully backed in.

"Backing?" Jenine said in surprise.

"Best way. You're all set in the morning."

"You never have before."

"Change," he said, "is the heart of joy."

Ramsgard stopped the small car beside his black Imperial and nodded. "Home to be good."

"Darling," Jenine said, "do you feel all right?"

"Feel swell." He got out to round the car and open the door for her. "What's for breakfast?"

"Breakfast?"

"Dinner, I mean."

They moved into a compact kitchen with copper edged appliances. "I was so busy today, I just didn't have time to prepare anything special. It's either cold roast beef, or a frozen dinner—take your choice—or else anything else I can do in a hurry."

"We should hire a cook again. I damned well can afford one."

"You liked my cooking better."

"I don't want to selfish be."

"Are you tired, dear? You don't look it, but—"

"I feel as though I just woke up. I know. Cornflakes or hot cakes."

"You're kidding."

"Not absolutely."

"Well—would you fix a Martini for us first?"

"I'll have mine after I eat."

In the dark-wooded library, before they retired, he read briefly, then put the book down, nodding with satisfaction.

"You couldn't possibly have finished that by now," Jeanine said. "Not even a mystery."

"I read the ending."

"You've never done that before."

"Time I started. Think of all the hours I've wasted trying to figure out who did it. There it is, right at the end of the book. Over it is."

She got up and placed a hand gently on his forehead. "I do love you so much, Chris."

"You love I."

"You haven't felt, well—different today?"

"Oh, a small dizzy spell. Nothing, really. What the hell, I'm forty-three."

"You shouldn't work so hard. Ever since Harry passed away—"

"Nonsense. I feel wonderful." He reached up and brought her face down, kissing her hard and long. She finally sighed happily, her mouth soft. "Well, I guess maybe—"

"Damned sleepy," he said. He disengaged himself and stood up to walk briskly to their bedroom where he undressed

swiftly, got into his pajamas and into bed. She followed shortly to find him asleep.

In the morning, with the first sunshine streaming over the bed, she awoke to find him kissing her again. She felt his hand firmly against her hip. "My goodness," she whispered. "What's happening?"

"Whatever it is," he said huskily, "you're going to like it."

A week later Ramsgard sat at the breakfast bar eating a thick filet of mignon. It was shortly after seven thirty in the morning; although there was a low layer of fog hiding the hills to the west, the sun shone brightly on Palo Alto.

"Really," Jenine said, crisp and pretty in a yellow frock, but looking worried. "*Brandy*, before breakfast."

"Well, drink it I didn't. Felt like it just I, that's all."

"Darling," she said, coming to the other side of the bar and looking at him intently. "There's something wrong."

"Wrong nothing's."

"We've got to talk about it."

"What about talk?"

"Just like that—the way to said it. You meant, 'Talk about what.' You said, 'What about talk!'"

Ramsgard shrugged. "Nothing it's."

"Darling, I suppose I shouldn't have—I've never interfered with your business affairs. But I checked, and everybody in the office has noticed it. *I* have. And it's getting worse every day."

"Worse getting *what*?"

"You're doing everything backward!"

Ramsgard held his fork with a morsel of steak on its prongs. He looked at the meat carefully. Then he moved the fork from his right hand to his left and resumed eating. "Nonsense."

"It is not nonsense. It began seven days ago, when you started talking funny, putting everything partially backward. Now it's almost totally backward. It isn't just the way you say things either. It's everything, including backing into the garage."

"Way best."

"You want breakfast at night, dinner in the morning. You even want to make love in the morning, instead of before we go to sleep. You never have before?"

"Complaining?"

"No! But it's a part of the entire pattern! Chris, you've got to see the doctor. Will you, please?"

He cut another portion of steak and ate hungrily.

"Will you let me make an appointment with John, Chris? For this afternoon?"

Ramsgard shrugged again. "KO."

An hour before he was expected home that evening, Jenine picked up the telephone and dialed Dr. John Cowley's office. "Did you find anything, John?"

"That man is the healthiest animal I've ever examined, Jenine."

"But didn't you notice the way he talks?"

"That is kind of nutty, isn't it? Talks backward half the time, doesn't he?"

"And he's doing other things backward too!"

"Now don't panic, Jenine. He might be in top-level health otherwise. But he's been working awfully hard since Harry died. Perhaps mental fatigue. Why don't you try to ring Neal in on it. Not obviously. You can figure some way. Let me know what happens."

"All right, John."

When Ramsgard had finished his cornflakes and drunk a Martini, Jenine said carefully, "How long has it been since we've invited the Lyles, dear?"

"Well, let's now see—" Then he looked at her quickly. "God, oh! Dr. Neal Lyle. The psychiatrist! Why *that* isn't?"

"I just thought it might be nice to have them over for dinner this weekend."

"Lord, oh! Was I John didn't say fiddle as a fit?"

There was a bright look of fear in Jenine's eyes, but she kept her voice softly calm. "The Lyles are our friends, dear."



"Hell the what," Ramsgard said wearily.

Marsha and Neal Lyle arrived at eight o'clock the following Friday evening. Marsha was a thin, smartly dressed woman with an edging voice which tended a great deal toward nervous laughter; she'd been a client of Neal's before he'd married her. Dr. Neal Lyle was a slight crew-cut man with an intense expression; his every motion bristled with energy and momentum. They all sat in the large living room and talked animatedly, until Ramsgard said, "Well, God by! Hungry I am! Else everybody?"

"Wouldn't you like to serve drinks first, dear?" Jenine asked.

"Dinner *before*? Me for after! First teeth his brush?"

"You go ahead, dear. We'll all eat then."

Marsha stared at Jenine with shocked eyes, as Ramsgard disappeared. Dr. Lyle rubbed a finger nervously across his upper lip.

"You see, Neal?" Jenine said.

He nodded. "Sure as hell do. Started a week and a half ago?"

"Yes. Do you know what he did last night? Showered, shaved, then put on his best business suit—and went to bed. You've got to help him!"

Jenine met Dr. Neal Lyle for lunch in a small grill on Post Street six weeks later. He ordered vermouth with a twist of lemon for each of them. Jenine held up her glass and smiled glowingly. "To you, Neal—a marvelous doctor of psychiatry."

Neal smiled obliquely. "He *has* shown considerable improvement, hasn't he?"

"Tremendous! He speaks almost naturally again. He eats breakfast in the morning, dinner at night, and we even—"

"I know," the doctor nodded. "He tells me everything."

"But he doesn't tell me. What happened? What was wrong? And how did you cure it?"

He tasted his wine absently. "Psychiatry's hardly a definite science yet, you know. I simply listened to him, ex-

ploring, here, there. Then I tried to reduce it to its simplest terms by digging into something that might have jolted him, recently. I couldn't find anything but the death of Harry Bell."

"I know he took it pretty hard. Yet—"

"Yet there wasn't anything else that might have upset his mental balance. Harry was his senior partner, his teacher—perhaps his father image, if you will. On the surface maybe it didn't seem Chris took it all that badly at the time. But I know something about a thing like that. I studied for a long time under Dr. Hugo Wenz. He was my mentor. Hero. Idol, if you will. He died just a year ago."

"I remember," Jenine nodded.

"He was far more important to me than I'd realized. Perhaps some of us never really grow to full maturity until we've kicked all the supporting traces. Maybe I was one of those. Because when Hugo died, I felt utterly helpless, as though I could never remotely approach my goals, with Hugo gone. So I thought—did Chris feel that way after losing Harry Bell?"

"You think he did?"

"Those were the symptoms, Jenine. Because he'd begun reversing things, I thought of it in the entire context of a subconscious urge to reverse everything in general—in an effort to go back to the way things had been before Harry Bell died. I concentrated on that. And treated him accordingly. Thank God, it seems to have worked."

Neal glanced at his watch; she saw it.

"I didn't mean to hang you up with this lunch if you're terribly busy."

"No, no. Plenty of time. I was just thinking about getting on a plane this afternoon. Hate to fly, you know. Should see a psychiatrist about it. But I have to be in Washington tomorrow morning." He smiled, but there was tension at the corners of his mouth. "I'll make it back in time to see Chris on Wednesday afternoon. That should be the last session."

Dr. Lyle's office was austere in its furnishings, but the

pale pink walls and ceiling gave it a restive atmosphere. Ramsgard sat on a couch, watching the doctor filling a hypodermic needle.

"Now you're using needles, Neal?"

"Little wind-up, old friend. Final check. To see how the progress has been."

"Something' psychedelic for me?"

Neal walked around the desk to sit down on its corner, smiling. "Something like that."

"Have a nice trip to Washington?"

"Very nice." He rested the needle gently against his knee.

"Jenine told you about our lunch before I left?"

"Should I be jealous?"

"Not at all. Did she describe how I'd diagnosed your problem?"

"It sounded very reasonable."

"Actually," the doctor said, "it was a lot of crap."

Ramsgard remained motionless, but his eyes were steady and alert. "Crap?"

"That's the word."

Finally Ramsgard laughed. "You're confusing me this afternoon, Doctor."

"Am I?"

Ramsgard looked at the needle. "You've got something to say. Say it."

A pulse was beating visibly in Neal's neck. "I *did* think at first that it might have been something along the lines that I described to Jenine. Not having seen a similar problem such as you were demonstrating before, I was willing to grab any straw. So I developed the theory of subconscious regression, based on your admiration for Harry Bell, who was dead. But still I knew that it was only a straw. So I took it up with one of my colleagues. That was when I found out what it really was."

"What it really was?" Ramsgard's voice was cold.

"My colleague had already discovered a similar case. He'd gotten in touch with other psychiatrists. *They'd* discovered some. Now you. The information has been pooled, in Washington. Shocking, but undeniable."

"I don't know the hell what you're about talking."

The doctor's eyes were watchful and shining. "You slipped on that last sentence."

"It say!"

"All right. The finest brains in the world were combined to figure it out—including those of several of our best theologians. The simple fact is that you are no longer Christopher Ramsgard. Chris' body, yes. But not what's inside."

"Ridiculous!"

"Hard to accept by us, at first. But the evidence is undeniable."

"Who the hell I am, then? Beast from space outer!"

"No," the doctor said softly. "A soul from a place that we know nothing about—death."

"Crazy you're!"

"There are some who have died—that is, their *bodies* have died. But whatever you want to term it—the soul, spirit, whatever—has landed somewhere in a void. Neither here nor there."

"There is where?" The voice had become thin and hard.

"I don't know. But it seems evident that most of the rest have reached *there*, whatever, wherever it is. Not not all. And those that haven't have combined together and, unwilling to move on to any ultimate destination, yet unwilling to hang in the void, have worked to return to this life. They are, we believe, of natural superiority, and have been able to accomplish this by means of a spiritual osmosis. Because of that superiority, they have been able to take over living bodies, pushing the lesser soul normally residing there out. Where, I don't know. Perhaps into some dimension that we know nothing about, or even could understand if we did. One here. One there. And the only thing that's gone wrong, so far, is that in the transfer there was the tendency for the alien soul, in the new body, to reverse things—especially as the take-over became complete. It's been a single similarity in all cases so far detected. But once the will was properly exerted, it was possible for all of you to correct the malfunction—as you have done. Except, that is, in moments of stress, when it shows up again."

"Lleh ot og!"

"Perhaps I eventually will, if there is one." Perhaps to heaven, if there is one. But if I land in that mid-point, like you did, I'll probably try to do the same as you and the others are doing—come back to this life by pushing someone else's soul aside and using his body. Can't blame you for that. But I'm of the living, you see. One of you may want my body. I'm not willing to give that up. Neither is anyone else, including the President. That's why you are going to be removed from this life, each of you, as you're detected."

"Devomer?"

"I talked to the President when I was in Washington. I was given an ultimate authority—license to kill." He lifted the needle. "It will be handled quite smoothly. A fake autopsy—diagnosing heart attack. A properly signed death certificate. You'll have to try over again. Tough on Jenine and Charlie, of course. But they lost Chris Ramsgard weeks ago. Shall I make a calculated guess about who I think you are?"

The familiar eyes of Christopher Ramsgard stared at the needle. "See?"

"Not only healthy bodies have been of prime consideration, but also positions of influence. Advertising is a position of influence—to create a center of power as you come back and, hopefully, multiply in numbers. Yes, you could use the knowledge of mass persuasion, very nicely. I suspect that even a psychiatrist might be of some use to you, too." He stood up and moved slowly toward the figure of Christopher Ramsgard. "Sorry, Harry Bell."

The pale blue eyes watched the needle approaching. The smooth forehead glistened with sweat. The needle came closer. Then the hand holding it stopped. Blue eyes looked at Dr. Neal Lyle; there was a soft count: "5, 4, 3, 2—"

"Can't it do!" the doctor whispered, swaying slightly.

Christopher Ramsgard's body relaxed. "Close," he breathed. "Awfully close."

The doctor looked at him, then backed and placed the

needle on the table.

The other stood up, smiling. "Welcome, Hugo."

"At all not I'm certain."

"You will be."

The doctor wagged his head. "Getting used to takes some."

"Relax," said Harry Bell. "You'll get the hang of it. Just sit down there. And I'll tell you just how we're going to beat them."





*It looks like Lincoln. It moves and talks  
and smiles like Lincoln. But it's a ma-  
chine. And it has an inevitable date with  
destiny.*

# the Deadly Image

■ EMILE VARNER CARESSED the worn, almost living features with a gentle, tracing finger. "Sooch weariness, sooch grandeur. That sooch a man should die." His own worn, tired mouth smiled softly, his tired old eyes lighted momentarily and his back, not quite hunched but gnome-like in droop, came almost erect. "But I make you live again."

Emile's kindly, gentle voice still held distinct traces of the old Bavarian accent, even after forty years. "Yes, by me you live again." His finger touched the eyelid with tenderness. "In a moment you will open those great eyes that saw so clearly. Sooch wise eyes, yet so shadowed, so tragically sad. Yet they lived to see a country united. "

He reached down and lifted one of the great gnarled hands, studied the knuckled fingers, turned the hand over as laid the hand lightly on the still breast. "In a moment... if he would read a destiny in the palm.

"United by these hands." Old Emile Varner sighed and a moment...you will...breathe."



"Hey, Pop!" The young, brash voice behind him startled the old man into sudden shivers. He pivoted slowly on bandy legs to glare at the younger man. What was the boy's name? Jim? John? It didn't really matter. He was just one of the clever young men, electronic experts they called themselves, Ellie—INFINITY—THE DEALY IMAGE—Galley 1 who were working under Varner. A pleasant, brassy young man, grinning now at Pop Varner. He nodded at the recumbent figure.

"He looks more like Lincoln than Raymond Massey."

The irreverence of it struck Emile Varner like a blow. His bent back straightened, his big, slightly over-sized head tossed so that the white hair whipped across his forehead.

"He *IS* Lincoln! That is the face which looked out over Gettysburg! Those hands rested on the Bible to take the Oath!"

"Sorry, sir." The young man really sounded regretful. He turned away from the fading anger in Varner's eyes and stared down at the recumbent figure. "Guess I've been working on the mechanics of it too long." He peered at the tired, noble face, quiet now in repose. "He looks—at peace."

Varner nodded. "He was a peaceful man. That is his face, it tells us so. His face. Cast from the death mask by Volka. His hands—from the very molds the good doctor took of him. The big, awkward knuckles. Even the lines. . . the tragic, abrupt lifeline. *That* should have warned him." Varner hesitated, smiled almost shyly at the young man. "Perhaps it did."

The young technician nodded, sober now. "I've heard stories. I mean, about his premonitions. Didn't he. . . Oh." The young man started. "Sorry, I forgot. I'm supposed to tell you we're going to activate the face. To time with the tape." He grinned at Varner. "Might be a little startling to see his eyes open and hear him talk if you weren't prepared."

Emile Varner stepped back, away from the recumbent giant, away from the young man. His own shabby suit and frayed cuffs took on some lustre of dignity from his proudly held head, his suddenly straightened back. "I have been prepared for this moment longer than you have lived." He hesitated, glanced at the tired, gentle face, speaking softly. "I

will stay with him. When he awakes it is better he sees first someone who loves him."

The young man stifled an exclamation, managed not to smile at the old man, and nodded. "Of course, sir. This is your moment." He turned away, walking rapidly across the stage, which had been weathered and aged artfully to simulate the stage of Ford's Theater. He passed the figure of Laura Keene, caught in a half curtsy toward the right hand box. So truly intent on the box was her simulated gaze that he perforce turned back to glance at it himself.

In the bunting-draped box, well forward, sat Mary Todd Lincoln, her curiously stiff curls framing the withering cheeks, her black lace fan held almost coquettishly. Behind her was the empty space. He could just see the high back of the old rocker where the figure of Lincoln would soon be placed.

To Mary Lincoln's right sat the vapid-faced girl. Alice? The young technician couldn't remember. And behind her, smart in a resplendent uniform, sat Major Rathbone, substitute for the aide who might have been alert enough to prevent...

"I'm getting as crackers as Varner," the young man told himself. "Been working too long on this project. That's the ticket. Keep thinking of it as a project, and it won't get to me, like it's gotten to Varner."

But he knew that wasn't quite right. There wouldn't have been any project if it hadn't been for Varner, with his intense dedication, his long, often spectacular battle to bring this off. The figure of Lincoln at the unfortunate New York World's Fair—now in Disneyland—had almost broken the old man, but the project had gone on.

And the Lincoln in Disneyland was good. Good, hell. It was a terrific accomplishment. A masterpiece. He'd spent long weeks studying the meticulous detail of the figure, the electronic console that controlled it.

But Varner's reproduction of the Ford Theater scene went far beyond that. Seven figures. The four in the box and Laura Keene in her pin-wheel gown standing in that half curtsy between the plump, dough-faced, overdressed haridan,

The Dowager, and the horse-faced, blundering Asa Trenchard. Joe Jefferson? No, not Joe Jefferson. He'd already left the company. Set up his own as Rip van Winkle. If he'd been at the theater that night, John Wilkes Booth wouldn't have been allowed in the house.

The young man shook his head, as if to clear it. "I'm doing it again. Reliving history. Damn the old man. He's got us so steeped in it we... Still, maybe we wouldn't have been so patient with the old boy... Kee-rist, this thing takes more programming than a Moon shot.

"And you'd better get with it," he told himself. "or some of that programming won't time out." He scuttled below the stage, into a brilliantly lit area crammed with electronic gear, long, fat cables reached up through the ceiling to animate the seven figures. Of course, the Dowager and the comic were mainly cyclical, a casual bow and then only breathing and slight motion, so they wouldn't look like wax-works. Laura Keane, as befitted the star with her own company—now why had she let Joe Jefferson go?

The young man joined the group around the great console, immersing himself deliberately in the intricacies of the equipment. This bank controlled Mary Todd Lincoln's timed bow which acknowledged the audience's applause. The vapid girl was to be made to turn twice and speak, or rather titter, at the Major. The Major was a little more complex. He had to stand when the President rose to speak and hold his broad-brimmed hat over his heart during the National Anthem. After all, with the war just over, there'd be the ceremony acknowledging the President in his first relaxation since the Peace Treaty.

Getting the old musical instruments—and men who could play them in the correct tempo—had been a job. Not *his*, thank goodness. And thank goodness there wasn't much that had to be coordinated with the music. Only the comic to stand at attention along with the major and the President.

The truly complex part came when Lincoln rose to speak. Eye movements to control, facial muscles to flex, the mouth to coordinate, the hands to move in lanky, awkward gestures, the tired swaying of the great, gaunt body so burdened with

the cares of a torn and bleeding nation. It would be a miracle if they could have all this complexity meshing in time for the opening performance. Yet he knew they would.

It looked like bedlam now, like confusion confounded, but it would all tie together. The curtain would go up—and Varner would taste his triumph.

Above, on the quiet stage, Emile Varner watched the tired face, cast from the Volk death mask into metal and a plastic so true it seemed like flesh. He waited solemnly, yet with a chest tightening exultation. In a moment...

The great eyes opened, blinked, then steadied on Varner's own majestic, wearied features. The lips opened, moved, but no sound came. Varner reached for one of the great, knuckled hands, cradling it in two of his. "Don't try to speak. Not yet. You're tired, Mister Lincoln. These are terrible times."

The face of Lincoln softened into a smile and the lips moved again. Suddenly Varner felt the hand open under his, twitch, then close with gentle pressure.

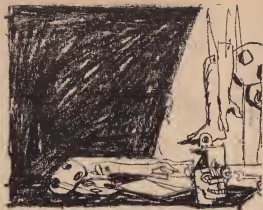
"I am your friend." Emile Varner watched the great, soft, baffled eyes close, and movement was stilled.

Below stage the electronics engineer at the console nodded, held up a hand, thumb and forefinger forming a circle of approval. "All contacts okay."

A week later the doors opened on the first performance of "Mister Lincoln at Ford's Theater," to a capacity house, mostly, of course, celebrities who carefully cultivate such premieres on advice of agents and managements, a large block of the backers and their friends, a few public officials whose main function seems to be attending functions, and a few of Lincoln's "just people," who had been lucky enough to obtain tickets.

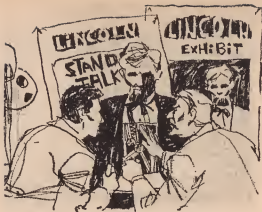
It had been a triumph for Emile Varner. Even the giddiest starlet had been subdued and awed. Officials congratulated themselves on for once having attended something that didn't bore them to death, and the backers went away happy, surrounded by groups of vociferously admiring friends.

Of course, there were some who were disappointed that



the show hadn't carried on to the assassination, but those critics were few. Some historians attended and argued afterward that Mister Lincoln hadn't said anything like that at Ford's Theater, which he hadn't, but Varner and the producers had taken certain license there. The Gettysburg address had seemed appropriate for that moment of ending a war.

Even after the opening night crowd left and the theater was deserted, except for Emile Varner seated far back in a corner, the final ringing words seemed to stir the curtain and sway the last, dimming lights... "that a government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from this earth."



Emile Varner, tears blurring his eyes, made his way down the center aisle and stopped just below the bunting draped box. He caught at the eye of the stage and looked up. "Thank you, Mister Lincoln." He turned and walked down the aisle to the spacious lobby, as he was to do every night after the last performance.

"Mister Lincoln at Ford's Theater" temporarily swept the latest Moon probe off the front pages of the newspapers and usurped vast numbers of pages in weekly news magazines. Radios talked of it, and television, as much as was permitted, showed portions of the tremendously complex electronic features, but always with rather awed references to

Mister Lincoln.

The publicity also triggered any number of new books on Lincoln and his era and revived interest in hundreds of others. Comparisons with the assassination of John F. Kennedy were revived and parallels cited, including the fact that both assassins had been paranoiacs, frustrated men who committed the greatest abomination each could conceive to satisfy a shrivelled and warped ego.

Emile Varner was in his usual place that night, weeks later, as the awed and silently admiring audience straggled out.

He waited a moment for the last flicker of lights that signalled the end of the long day. Only a few scattered lights would be left on for the cleaning crew, and he watched them flash mechanically on. Slowly he made his way down the aisle, made his good night speech and then dropped down below stage for a final check, as he always did, to be sure that none of the equipment had been left turned on inadvertently.

All was in order. Emile Varner nodded approvingly. His crew was good. He started back up the narrow stairs which opened into the orchestra pit just below the draped box. It was only then that he heard the voices.

Some of the crew remaining late? The cleaning people? No, they wouldn't be in until nearly dawn. Then who...?

Silently, on old legs gone shaky, Emile tiptoed up the last remaining steps and turned toward the stage.

A young man stood there. Just how Emile knew he was young he couldn't say. Something in the arrogance of the head, the lithe, supple stance of the body, visible despite the short cape. The figure was vaguely familiar, yet he couldn't place it. Shadows from the work lights obscured the face.

The figure moved, darted toward the box, and the voice, tight with strain and anger, shouted out. *"You can't do this! You're dead! Dead a century! You should be forgotten! I am the martyr! I sacrificed everything—career, love, money, to destroy you! I should be the one they honor! The statues*

*belong to me. The pedestal, the praise, the warmth of human love! You've stolen them from me!"*

"No." The tall, gaunt figure rose from the rocking chair and stepped to the front of the box. "I stole nothing, young man. You struck in anger, frustration, in some perverted sense of revenge." The voice died almost to a whisper, gentle, kindly. "I bear you no ill will. Not even for the agony I endured from your bullet. Not even for the things I might have done to heal the breach of this tragic war."

The slender figure took another step, one arm flashing up, a single splash of light along the silver tongue of a dagger. "*You robbed me of honor, for a deed that should have rung down through the ages!*" The young, strained voice went off hysterically. "*For you I died in disgrace, hunted, hiding in a barn, when all the world...*"

The gentle, weary voice of Abraham Lincoln spoke from the box, the magnificent eyes looking down in pity. "Revenge, my son, is the recourse of small souls. You cannot expect honor for revenge."

*"I can! It is my due! My due, for a noble deed, nobly conceived... As Caesar had his Brutus, as..."*

His breath tight in his chest, his limbs leaden, Emile Varner moved. It seemed as if he moved through heavier air, with difficulty, even with pain, but his hand found the revolver he had always carried since those mad days of vengeance back in Germany.

He raised the weapon, steadying it on the lip of the stage, aimed at the young man's back, before he spoke. Just one single, crisp, short word.

"Stop!"

The young man whirled, one hand diving under his cape for a derringer. Emile Varner stared at the face, familiar from a thousand picture studies. John Wilkes Booth.

*"You can't stop me! This time I shall..."*

Emile Varner fired.

The young man staggered, gasped and turned so that he faced the work light. The head tilted far back, the mouth opening in a silent scream. Then, as the slender figure



slumped, the agonized face went blank.

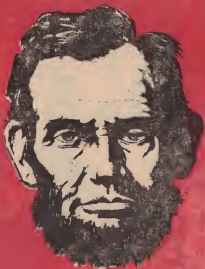
And changed, softened, grew younger, calmer. The young technician? What was his name? James? John?

"Oh, god! I've made a ghastly mistake!" Emile Varner tried to clamber to the stage and couldn't quite make it.

The young technician crumpled slowly, rolling until his eyes stared into Varner's. His voice was a dying whisper in a mouth that twisted in pain. "I...didn't...want to... He... took over..." The last word trailed off into a faint whisper, a little more than a stirring in the dust.

And then the figure was dust, old, desiccated, with a faint odor of the tomb. And the dust settled into a tidy outline, leaving nothing but the derringer and a silver glitter of a dagger on the stage.





THE DEADLY IMAGE



# REVENGE AT THE TV CORRAL!

*As a TV star, Ken Dexter was regaled up. Now his wife and his TV "replacement" were having a "thing." And Dexter was mad enough to kill somebody. Or somebodies!*

■ KEN DEXTER WAS ON his way to murder his wife. Slouched behind the wheel of the Jag, he almost snickered, thinking about it. It read like a line in one of his old scripts. They had always opened that way. Good, meaty drama, setting a clear objective. "Ken Dexter is on his way to the Bar X to capture Black Bart." "Ken Dexter is on his way to the Tumbleweed Mine to..."

The series always opened with Ken Dexter bent low in the saddle, urging his horse to a mad gallop across the prairie—it always seemed the same prairie, whether it was the old Forty Acres lot at RKO, now Desilu, or Corriganville, or Century Farm. And they always wound up with Ken Dexter, spraddle-legged, in the middle of a dusty street—or prairie—or mesa—or suddenly cleared dancehall—arms taut and out from his sides, ready for his famous "fastest draw" when the showdown came.

What happened in between might vary some, but there

were always those two things—Ken's trademark—the things the kids loved. Loved? They ate it up! "Western Marshal" was tops on TV.

And now...

... Eyes a little bleared, Ken Dexter glared up at the vast twenty-four sheet splayed across the billboard, hate welling in him, tasting sour. He must have seen a dozen of 'em so far. One at practically every stop light:

## WESTERN MARSHAL

*With a great new star*

BILL TODD

as RANDY, out to avenge  
the death of his uncle,  
the great crusading marshal,  
Ken Dexter

*Randy Carries On, Protecting The Weak*

See WESTERN MARSHAL on your local TV station

Tues. 6:30 p.m.

And the famous looming figure, almost a silhouette, a tense, gun-quick nemesis of the lawless West, back to the camera, hands tight and ready for the incomparable draw. But that was Bill Todd's back, Bill Todd's tense, trigger-quick hands, Bill Todd's battered Stetson.

Ken fought back the wave of rage that made the whole billboard waver, gave a momentary semblance of life to the boldly silhouetted figure. *Bill Todd!* The man who had stolen his show, his guns, his popularity, his wife—and now, blazoned to the world, Ken's life.

"You're dead, Ken." Pudgy little Boris Kahn had aimed a cigar at him as if it were the gun he was shooting him with. "Or Ken Dexter's dead, Mister Whatever-Your-Name-Is. I don't even remember your real name. And if you want to know, I don't want to remember it. If I could I'd like

to forget I ever knew you."

Ken swallowed bitter phlegm, hating Boris. Then, weak with hate, he slumped in the car—which wouldn't be his after tomorrow.

Oh, the buzzards gathered. *Mister Whatever-Your-Name-Is!* Boris knew his name all right. It was on the contracts. Well, one of his names, anyway. One of several Ken had used and discarded. How many had there been altogether? The one he'd used with Tony's gang in Chicago and the one he'd skipped under. And the several he'd used covering his tracks. But before that? With the South Side Cougars he'd been. . . It didn't matter, and thinking was too much effort. Remembering was too long and bitter a road.

But the facts and the acts had etched lines, given him a tight-lipped audacity, a calculating, measuring glance and a quick, deadly smile. Out of that had come Ken Dexter, Western Marshal. A Boris Kahn creation. Well, the dumpy little bastard had had nothing to do with it. *I made Ken Dexter!*

Behind him a horn blared, jangling his nerves. He squinted to see in the rear view mirror. A fat, dumb blonde, leaning on her horn. He had to clamp down on taut nerves to keep himself from grabbing the gun and blasting it in her fat, stupid face.

"Shaddup!" He grated the gears and screamed the tires in a start that jolted his head back, throwing the billboard in odd, jerking perspective, so that the crisply outlined figure seemed to crouch and begin the famous deadly turn.

A drink. He needed a drink. Just one more, to steady his nerves. His eyes slid sideways, searching for a bar. Keerist! Didn't they have any bars along this crummy street? A man didn't murder his wife every day. And Ken needed something. Even a beer. Just one more drink.

"That's your trouble, Ken. Just one more drink."

Who said that? Ken whipped his head around, to stare at the empty bucket seat beside him. No, not empty. In it lay one of his deadly guns—the one he was going to kill Leonora with. And then Bill Todd. And Boris. Ken's mouth twitched. Boris! *He'd* said that about the drinks.

"And one more. And one more, and then one to chase it." Boris had shrugged fat shoulders. "I should care? You could fill that swimming pool with bourbon and dive in. On your own time, Ken. And in your own backyard." The cigar had stabbed at him. Ken could almost smell it, against the odors of exhaust fumes, the reek of hot asphalt. "But not on my set. Not in front of my cameras. Not out in public, where the cops pick you up and book you. How does that look? Ken Dexter, Western Marshal, the man who cleans the West, gets fighting drunk in bars!

Boris threw up his plump hands. "I don't talk about cost, even. So what's a hundred thousand to square a beef?" He had clawed at his hair and aimed that stinking cigar at Ken again. "I tell you. It is one-hundred-thousand-dollars. Say it slow or fast, it's money."

Money? Ken swayed in the seat, wondering what had happened to it. Sure, he's spent it. That babe he'd set up at Palm Springs had cost. He leered, remembering. But worth it. Oh, worth it. And the house in Beverly Hills. And the ranch. And the horses. Keerist, how he hated horses, but they were part of the act. And cars, fast, low-slung cars. The way he drove 'em, they didn't stand up. Junky, these modern cars. And squaring beefs. So he got in a fight now and then? Back in Chicago, he'd gotten in fights and beat up guys—and been paid for it. So what's a fight?

"So what's a fight?" Boris seemed to be sitting in the bucket seat, jeering at him. Ken knew it had happened weeks ago, maybe a couple-three months. Time wasn't so clear any more. "I'll tell you what a fight is. Three points down on the Neilsen. And you can't afford to lose, like you been doing, an extra three points. The Western Marshal, cold-cocked by a shoe salesman.

"A shoe salesman!" Boris had almost whimpered.

Ken growled right along with the gears as he shifted at the intersection. Shoe salesman? The guy had been as tall as a Texan and tough. But the papers had jeered.

He'd been getting a bad press. For what? For nothing. Sure, he'd slugged a couple of photographers. Well, they'd



been ogling Leonora, hadn't they? Kidding and laughing off there with her, shooting pictures of Leonora at the piano, at the dish washer, at the sink, by the pool. Laughing with her, pawing her, only they called it setting the picture. Nuts!

You can't let bums like that paw your wife, Leonora. Keeerist! What a babe! And not a bim, like the schlock in Palm Springs. Real society. Social register stuff. With her own money, too. And wide-eyed for him.

The waves of her perfume swept across him, confusing him for a moment, so that he almost shot through the light. She was right there in the bucket seat. Somehow she'd replaced old Boris, and was sitting there, primly, gloved hands in her lap, as she had sat three years ago. "I'm not mistaking you for a great actor, Mister Dexter. And I don't think you do. But you *do* stand for something fine and de-



cent. You're a symbol. Not violence for the sake of violence, but for justice, for a cause."

Cute, too. Yeah, she'd been gone on him. Real gone. But, and Ken frowned, not quite gone enough. He'd had to marry her to get beyond a few kisses. They'd proved out the assay, too, like he said sometimes in his scripts. A very warm and loving babe indeed.

It hadn't lasted. It wasn't really my fault, Ken told the wave of perfume, not looking at the bucket seat. There was this babe, see. Cute. Exciting. Willing. And not nag, nag, nag.

\* "I wasn't nagging, Ken. I don't like to have to say these things. And if it was just the humiliation, I could endure it. But you're ruining yourself. You're destroying an image, one that's good and fine."

Bill Todd loomed up before him gigantic, a monster endurable only because of distance and perspective. Fourteen feet high. That's what the contract specified. The figure should be fourteen feet high. So it would look life-size from the street. And there it was.

Ken slammed down on the brakes, ignoring the cursing guy behind who had to squeal to a stop. Those blasted billboards were all over town. So the show needed a shot in the arm, now that Ken Dexter was no longer on it. But did they have to fling those billboards all over the landscape?

He squinted, trying to focus. Maybe that last bourbon had been one too many. But he'd needed it. He blinked to clear his vision. Yeah. The familiar stance was altered. What were they trying? Some new gimmick? The figure was half crouched, turning, the swift, deadly hand almost on the butt of the gun.

Ken didn't like it. It made him uneasy. And it must have cost dough, plenty of dough. Keenerist! Imagine, making every billboard different, like a series of frames in the film. Boris was really pouring the dough behind Bill Todd. That crumb.

Who was Bill Todd? A nothing. A nobody.



Oh, so smooth. So very smooth. Educated, too. Real college type. Not that it got in his way on the set. The Virginia drawl deepened, lengthened. The college words vanished. The military squareness disappeared into an easy, casual slouch. And that engaging grin. It threw you a curve.

Ken could hear the faintly apologetic tone. "They're just sticking me in for teen-age interest. Trying to broaden the audience base, Mister Kahn said. The sponsor wants to appeal to girls, too. Teens, subteens."

Ken had laughed. "Okay, so go after the San Quentin quail. I never cared for 'em that young, but some do." Well, that had got under the boy scout's pink hide.

"You like the scenery here, maybe?" The voice was rough, jocular, and the cop was standing by the Jag, nodding at the light. At ease, but ready to get tough. Yeah, Ken knew cops. From way back. "When it turns green, mister, it means

go..." His salute was casual, but he meant it. "And you go."

Ken bit back a snarl. Smart cop. For two cents, he'd reach down and snag the gun and pump this dumb cop so full of holes... Hold it! Hold it! He had to sit on his temper, keep a tight grip on the rage that flared through him.

Dumb cop! Hadn't even recognized the great Ken Dexter, idol of millions. Probably the cops kids watched Ken Dexter round up the bad guys every Tuesday and maybe needled pop because he was only on traffic detail. Ken almost laughed. Fine cop this one was. Couldn't even recognize the great Ken Dexter.

Or maybe it was the hair piece? Not wearing it. And the rubber dinguses that squared out the famed Dexter jaw. Ken shifted, pulled out, growling not so much at the cop as at the hairpiece. Time was, not so long ago, when he hadn't needed it.

Besides, how'd the cop be expecting to see Ken Dexter? Ken Dexter was dead.

Ken Dexter was dead.

But Mister Whatever-Your-Name-Is sat in the Jag, guiding it through the maze of traffic, headed for Leonora's place, a gun ready at his side. Yeah, Mister Whatever-Your-Name-Is was very much alive, even if Ken Dexter was dead.

Killed by a paper bullet.

"You're killing me! With a paper bullet!" He had screamed it at Boris, at the bright crew-cut young man from the agency. Mister... His name didn't matter. Oh, yeah. Frisby. He'd looked like a Frisby, too.

"You put it admirably," Mister Frisby had said. "Ken Dexter is a property, not a person, created by a piece of paper, a contract. And abolished the same way, by a piece of paper."

"But I *AM* Ken Dexter." He had screamed it at them, lunging out of the chair to thrust his face at Boris, to glare at Frisby. "I *AM* Ken Dexter."

"Ken Dexter is dead." Boris had said it almost lugubriously, bowing his head as if he briefly mourned a passing.



Then it looked at Ken with button-bright, angry eyes. "So, Mister Whatever-Your-Name-Is, scram. Get out. You're through. Kaput!"

They had meant it. He had seen that in Boris' small, angry eyes, in the bland indifference in Frisby's. "Why?" He had tried, then, to curb his temper. "Why kill off Ken Dexter? He's a valuable property."

"Was a valuable property," Frisby had corrected.

"But why? I can still do Ken Dexter. I can..."

"Staggering?" Boris was bored or covering anger with the appearance of boredom. "So kids will see Ken Dexter fall on his face? For weeks, now, we slow down the cameras so the draw will look fast. And I got to tell the actors to walk slow, move slow. And hope it don't show we fake it. And it shows. And stay on a horse? Mister Whatever-Your-Name-Is, you can't stay on a barroom floor without falling off." Boris had thrust the cigar in his fat, soft mouth, chomping belligerently. "So Ken Dexter is dead."

They did it up in style. Even a funeral, with wreaths, with Boy Scouts carrying dipped colors, with words of sorrow. They wrote in a sequence in the show where Ken Dexter, actually a double with only his shoulders and the famous hat showing, was treacherously shot in the back. Bill Todd, the sop to subteeners as Ken Dexter's young nephew, had taken over, vowing to avenge the cowardly murder of the great crusading marshal.

So Ken Dexter was dead.

And there was Bill Todd, fourteen feet tall, up there on another billboard, a different picture again, crouching now, hand on the butt of the gun, ready for the famed crouching lunge and incredible shooting he had learned as aide to the Western Marshal.

The living remnant of Ken Dexter sneered at the billboard, pawing at the seat beside him for the gun. Why, he could outshoot that smarty pants college boy any day in the week. And would.

He had to force his hand away from fumbling for the gun. And then he realized it. Fumbling? Keenerist? That gun used to jump into his hand. He swung around, scrabbling wildly with both hands and still it eluded him. Horns were blaring, one pitched high and sneeringly whiney. If he could just get his hands on...

Not here! Not now! He made himself settle back in the bucket seat, grip the wheel and edge the Jag forward with traffic, passing the billboard, looking up, so that he all but clipped a dove-gray Caddy.

He could almost imagine he saw Bill Todd's eyes following grimly as he escaped from under the menace of that lightning gun.

Bill Todd.

A free-wheeling creep, college type. Wouldn't drink. Not in public bars. "I really don't care that much about it. And, as Boris says, there's the public image, Ken." It had gotten to be Ken awful quick. "A social drink, sure."

So the social drinks had been at the Dexter house, or around the Dexter pool, or at the Dexter ranch. Wherever Leonora was. As if he hadn't seen through them. Social

drinking? Keeerist! The boy didn't take enough to drown a gnat. But he liked hanging around Leonora. And Leonora liked him around.

She had admitted it, when Ken had bawled her out about it. And he hadn't really hit her. Not mauled her. A slap, for emphasis. And then Bill Todd was holding his arms tight, fingers like pincers biting. So tight he hadn't been able to move. Of course, he'd been a little drunk. Well, not really drunk but just not tracking quite right.

Or he'd have torn into the kid. Shown him what a rough-house really was.

"That's one reason I like Bill around." Leonora hadn't even put her hand to the reddening cheek, just stared, icily smiling. "To protect me from my husband." Her mouth had trembled, then, but her chin had come up, and her eyes had blazed back at him. "That is a rather horrible thing to say. To have to say. And the other is possibly worse. I like to have Bill Todd around because he's far more interesting, as a man, than my husband."

"You..." The name he had called her drove the blood from her face. And Bill Todd had swung him around, one handed, and drawn back a fist.

"Don't, Bill." And Bill had stopped, without even a gesture from her, just calm, icy words. "He isn't worth it. He's only a paper man, a celluloid hero, a flat, two-dimensional character on a TV tube. Otherwise, he doesn't exist. A creature." She had turned and gone back to join their guests, no doubt smiling graciously, making polite conversation.

Bill had half carried, half dragged him to his room. Yeah, *his* room. Leonora had moved into her own room months ago and he hadn't been welcome there.

Bill had flung him contemptuously across the bed and stared down at him, towering over him, like the fourteen-foot figures on the billboards.

"Don't lay a hand on her. Ever again. Or I'll kill you. I mean that. Quite literally. I'll kill you." The calm, deadly words had almost sobered him, and he had glared up, hating the young, tanned face, the steadiness of the eyes boring

into his, the sure, powerful hands, clenched, white knuckled. "I'll be watching you. I'll know every move you make. And if you make one single gesture toward hurting Leonora, I'll kill you."

Bill had meant it, too. He had turned and left him there, flung like a puppet across the bed, a mass of hate, seething, actually crying in his frustration. Why, a year ago, he could have licked that young cub with one hand behind him. And he could again. Just sober up...

But he hadn't sobered up. Too many things crumbled around him at once. The contract was gone. Leonora had left for Reno. Bill Todd was on location.

He glanced down at his hands on the wheel, thin, flaccid, veined. Not too steady. But steady enough for what he had to do.

Leonora was back now from Reno, free. But she'd never be free. She'd be dead. And then Bill. And finally Boris. Killing Leonora would be the best, the most satisfying. And he was close. Getting closer.

Out in Beverly Hills there wouldn't be any more of those blasted billboards, taunting him, towering over him, threatening him. He could see another one ahead. Bill Todd, in the famed Western Marshal crouch, ready for that final spring, gun blazing. They were carrying through on these screwy billboards. Why, this one...

He could see the figure move! The gun was coming up, swinging to train on the moving car!

He jammed down on the accelerator, and reached for the gun on the seat...scrabbling...frantic! Both hands! He needed both hands! He had the gun, swung it, out and up, aiming over the slope of windshield! He could feel it buck in his hands, hear the thundering roar!

The windshield shattered in front of him. Something slammed against his chest, driving him deep into the bucket seat. And the car was hurtling, swerving...

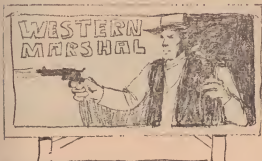
Blackness.

Faint and far away he could hear voices, a babble of excitement. Then sharp and icy clear, close at hand, he heard two of them. Cops. Keererist! Cops.

"Missed the curve, Lieutenant. And crashed. The man in the MG says he suddenly let go the wheel and started blazing away at that billboard with a forty-five. How crazy can you get, shooting at a billboard?"

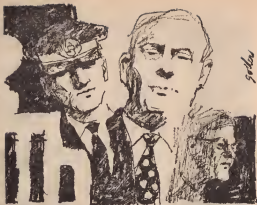
"Well, about as crazy as the dame in the Falcon behind him. She swears the billboard shot back. Hey! Look, Beatty. There's a bullet hole in the windshield...And this guy's been shot!"

"Lieutenant...Look. At the billboard. That's what fooled her. See, that new TV star. He's blowing smoke from his gun. And smiling."









*Wes Pepper's newspaper column had driven 12 people to an early grave. Now he had set his sights on his 13th victim.*

## THE 13TH CHAIR

WES PEPPER, ACID-PENNED columnist whose "*Salt and Pepper*" was known, if, not loved, from coast to coast, stood outside the Board Room of Consolidated Publications grinning crookedly and hugging the handsome attache case

tight against his narrow chest with his withered arm. His mouth worked until he had the saliva ready. Then he spat, carefully missing the sand-filled urn by the door.

The uniformed attendant with him winced but said nothing, careful not to see the malicious challenge in Wes Pepper's eyes.

Wes enjoyed the attendant's cautious restraint, and then was provoked with himself. Such a petty demonstration of his power, and on a mere servant.

He cut his eyes around and up, surveying the blank automaton young man. *That's what they are, automata, mechanically going through a semblance of living, servants to wait upon the pleasure of Wes Pepper.*

This carefully imperturbable young man would never taste the sweetness of power, of controlling the destinies of others. Wes felt of his Countess Mara tie, brushed the Sulka shirt with a fingertip. This young man would spend his life being content with a minor job. Evenings would find such a clod with some equally dough-faced female, fancying her a princess by an alchemy provided for such creatures, and together in fancied rapture...

"Wes pulled himself back from the swirling pictures, from the riot they created in his veins. What right had such a creature to be so tall, with two muscular arms and long sturdy columns of legs? What right had this nonentity to laugh with girls, to hold them close, smell their heady fragrance, feel response and even eagerness in their slender youthfulness.

Wes swivelled on his ungainly boot, glaring up at the rigidly controlled face. He twisted his thin, mobile mouth into a sneer. "I shall have to report you for not remonstrating with me about spitting on the floor."

"I expect so, sir."

Wes hugged the attache case tighter. This was fun... It wasn't often he got an opportunity to bait a victim face to face.

"In other words, I'll get you fired." Wes waited expectantly, hopefully, for the rigid face to break, the voice to plead. That would be delicious.

Instead the young man's mouth flickered into a brief, hastily quenched smile. "I doubt it, sir."

Wes drew a deep, shuddering breath of anger. A servant, speaking like this to Wes Pepper, whose syndicated column, "*Self—and Pepper*" had cut better men to shreds, had driven men to...

He controlled himself. So word had seeped down to this subterranean level that the Great Wes Pepper was through, finished, fired. They must have been very sure of themselves. He glared at the Board Room doors. Very sure. His thin lips tightened in a rictus grin. That would make his triumph all the sweeter.

He hated having to look up at people yet he glared up at the tall man with malevolent glee. "So you don't think I can get you fired?"

"No, sir."

The quiet assurance of it infuriated Wes. This grinning jackanapes didn't yet realize the power Wes wielded with his column, or the ruthless manner of his wielding it. White showed around his elegant nose and tight, twisted mouth. "You're fired! Word will be with your superior in an hour."

"I resigned, sir. A week ago, effective today." The young man waved toward the door. "Mister Wellington will see you now."

Herbert Wellington stuck his head out one of the massive mahogany doors, his cold blue eyes sweeping Wes Pepper, then on to the young man. He stepped out, extending a hand. "Sorry to lose you, Edward. Good luck on your new venture." The gracious smile died and Wellington swept his hand around, indicating the room to Wes.

Wes sneered. So the new chairman could be gracious to a flunkey and coldly impersonal with Wes Pepper. But not for long. Wes sniggered again, convulsively hugging his attache case, and stepped into the Board Room.

It was vast and impressive but Wes refused to be impressed, even by the empty throne at the Board Chairman's place or by the six lesser chairs down each side of the long table and the pink-faced, barbered men sitting in them, a



row of mannikins, store window dummies. Wes had to stifle another snigger as the picture presented itself. If they only knew. Nor was he impressed by the still lesser thirteenth chair, where he himself would sit, target for twelve pairs of hostile eyes. Nor by the heavily framed oil portrait of Owen Matthews, founder. Wes covered a sneer, flicking his eyes away from the old, benign face.

Striving to minimize his dragging limp, Wes moved down the room, his eyes sardonic with anticipated malice. Seated, as he always was on his TV shows, his foot hidden, his withered hand in his lap, he was almost impressive. His head was good, too large really for his spindley body but, seated, that didn't show. His hair was strong, oddly virile for such a wizened man, and his eyes were large when he chose to open them fully. And on TV he always managed to keep a faint smile working. Now he didn't bother, and the perpetual sneer was visible, the eyes hooded and venomous. These men were his enemies. They were soon to be his victims. He savored that with a spasmodic wriggle and throaty, raspy chuckle.



Herbert Wellington, though now Chairman, avoided the throne from which Owen Matthews had conducted his newspaper empire until his sudden death three days before. Instead, Wellington took his usual seat, a side chair to the right, leaving the carved, high-backed throne ominously vacant, a reminder of Matthews' recent passing. From this sideline position he conducted the meeting, glancing down the table, past the pink, scrubbed faces, at Wea.

"Mister Pepper, in view of the recent court verdict of three million dollars for libel and malicious slander, and in view of pending suits totalling nearly seven million, we feel that your column is an expensive luxury we can no longer afford. It is our intention to terminate your contract forthwith, as per Clause 18. I may add that your column's vile, vindictive nature is abhorrent to each of us personally, and it has been continued, over our protests, at the dogged insistence of our founder and late Chairman, Owen Matthews, who, for some reason, seemed to feel an affection for, or obligation toward, you. You may pick up your terminal check at the cashier's desk."

Wes sniggered at the pomposity, nodding his head in a curiously abstracted way, as if he hadn't really heard. Now he turned his sardonic eyes down the table, scanning each fatuous pink face. "My column, '*Soft—and Pepper*,' is read by millions. Gentlemen, it sells papers. A great many papers."

"Not any more. We had fifty cancellations by large metropolitan dailies in the past week."

"Scared," Wes Pepper sneered, "by a court decision that will be reversed on appeal!"

"It will not be reversed, Mister Pepper. You fabricated, out of whole cloth, a story so scurrilous, so foul, and yet so seemingly convincing that a great military man took his own life rather than subject the service he loved to any more of your vicious, unwarranted attacks."

Herbert Wellington reddened with anger, his voice harsh and strident. "We, our papers and those we serve, are responsible for the death of Major General Mark Travers. And for that of the unfortunate girl he befriended."

"She's a Communist," Wes sniggered again. "But such a *pretty* Communist."

Wellington's fingers around the gavel whitened. "She was *never* a Communist. A refugee, yes, helped by the general *and his wife*. And *his wife*," Wellington repeated, "has remained faithful to his memory and justified it in court. Your lies and your venomous personal vendetta were exposed there. Too late to save either the general or that poor, unfortunate girl. I suppose you know she was spirited, or kidnapped, behind the Iron Curtain, and died there because she could not reveal secrets General Travers had NOT given her."

"Are you quite finished?" Wes let a purr of amusement creep into his voice.

"No!" Wellington spoke with restrained rage. "That performance of yours had at least the dubious cloak of patriotism, the pretense of exposure of a plot. But your series of attacks on Velma Blayne drove a fine and sensitive young star to run her car off a cliff."

"Not proven." Wes dismissed it airily. "She was a drug addict."

"Not proven," Wellington returned. "Very much not proven. But you wrecked her career. And killed her. My God, man, have you no conscience?"

Wes waved his good hand, dismissing the accusations. "For exposing a Communist and a drug addict? None at all."

"Was Emile Struthers a Communist? Or a drug addict? Your vile and unfounded insinuations sent his daughter to an insane asylum and Emile to his grave of a stroke."

"Weaklings! All of them. Weaklings!" Wes brushed this aside, to get to the meat of this session, over which he was already gloating.

"Was Charles Furness, the fighter, a weakling?" Were Clare Montrose, William Vordette, Don Stoddard, Fritz Klieber and how many others? Were they all weaklings? or simply human beings wracked by your merciless attacks! No, Mister Pepper, you have destroyed your last victim in the name of journalism. You are a stink in the nostrils."

Wes Pepper patted the table with his good hand, a mocking applause. "A very able speech, Mister Wellington. I'm sure there isn't a dry eye in the house. Even mine. However, mine are tears of laughter. I am a columnist. It is my job to ferret out and expose human foibles. If, in the process, a few weak ones are hurt..." He shrugged. "But before you take any action you'll regret, I suggest you read these." His good hand pawed at the attaché case and came out with a bundle of envelopes. He flung them contemptuously down the table. "One for each. I think it would be less embarrassing if you each got your own..."

Herbert Wellington frowned at the scattered envelopes. "What are those?"

Wes Pepper winkered with malevolent delight. "Tidbits. Private to each. So take your own envelopes, please." He sat back, a small, vindictive man with a large head, resting in apparent ease in the big chair. "Those are items for future columns. With another syndicate, of course. If I am forced to move."

"No other syndicate would touch you," Wellington stated it with conviction.

Pepper picked up another envelope and shook it at them.



"This says there's at least one other syndicate that will."

Wes hugged himself with glee, watching the surreptitious opening of the envelopes, hearing the gasps and grunts of dismay.

"This is monstrous!" Wellington slammed his paper on the table and pinned it with a broad palm.

"Blackmail!" A thin, gaunt man crumpled his in a ball, glaring at Wes. "A pure fabrication."

"Is it, Senator?" Wes grinned wickedly. "Pure isn't the word I'd have used."

"You have twisted the truth out of all semblance..." A ruddy-faced man carefully lit a match and burned his paper, dropping it in an ashtray.

"There are other copies, Mister Fordyce." Wes Pepper's sly eyes slithered down the table, appraising, probing. Then again, in a flash, he saw them as mannikins, stiff, immobile in their chairs.

"You *are* a monster! A warped and twisted monster!"

One of the mannikins had spoken. Wes Pepper went white. His withered arm twitched violently and his ungainly boot beat a queer, rattling tattoo on the floor. "For that, Mr. Elwood Ames, watch my Monday column."

"There will be no Monday column." Wellington made it firm, final. "So this is how you managed Owen Matthews? Blackmail? No wonder his heart gave out. You drove him to his grave, Pepper. These latest attacks of yours...his great heart just couldn't take it."

Wes shrugged. "He took it. Until his pocketbook was hit."

"That's equal to the rest of your scurrilous attacks. Or worse. Owen Matthews was a great man, a great humanitarian. I don't know, and I don't want to know, what monstrous hold you had on him. But as of now, you're through. I will not tolerate this attempt to blackmail us. Publish and be damned, as a better man than I has said. If you can find a sewer for your filth."

Wes sat back, enjoying in feline voluptuousness the chorus of protests and pleas around the table. Finally he held up his good hand, silencing the mannikins, smiling crookedly at Wellington. "Your confreres are not quite as eager as you



to throw me out. Shall we vote?"

The harangue was long and agonizing but each time the eyes of the men strayed to those envelopes, the protests lessened. And Wes knew, with monstrous satisfaction, that he had won. Finally, he flung a batch of papers on the table. "Notes for the next few columns. The first should be out Friday, just before the astronaut lands." He bounced a little in his chair, watching, a cat-grin pursing his mouth, his eyes narrowed to slits, as the others picked up their copies, scanning them hurriedly.

Wellington laid the copy on the table. "Not a word of this is true."

Wes shrugged, impatient now to get away, to gloat privately and long over his victory. "Chet Barnes has spoken to the Russians. In Russian."

Wellington's face tightened. "A few words of greeting to fellow astronauts, learned by rote. And authorized. All the Russian he knows."

Pepper's grin pulled his mouth awry. "Are you sure? Will the public be sure?"

"And this monstrous lie about giving the Russians secret information. He is authorized to broadcast from the capsule certain information on an open channel."

"Is that all the information he'll broadcast? My source says not. My source says he'll broadcast more. And it'll be in code."

"Your source is your own warped mind. And this...about Barnes' wife and George Peters, the other astronaut..."

Wes grinned. "Peters has been comforting Elena Barnes every one of the nights Chet has been in orbit. Tonight's the sixth, isn't it? A glamorous bachelor and a beautiful, passionate woman?" Pepper caught up his attaché case in his good hand. "That's all I say." He grinned wickedly. "I may say more later, but that will do for now. We can't have clay idols for heroes, can we. And before you try anything rash, I suggest you each read your own dossier...carefully."

In the basement garage, after careful scrutiny of the

bright-lit aisles, Pepper scuttled to his car and settled behind the security of bullet-proof glass. He drove out of the city, turning off at gates he operated electronically from the car. He drove a short distance to a stone fortress of a house, opened the garage doors electronically and slid in.

Only then did he breathe deeply and securely. Dragging his ungainly boot wearily, now that there was no one to see, he went from the garage directly into the house. At duplicates of the Board Room doors he paused, suddenly chuckling. He thrust open one of the double leaf doors and peered in.

It was a grotesque copy of the Board Room he had recently left, even to the long table, the throne at its head, six chairs down each side—and the empty thirteenth chair at the foot.

On each side chair, in grim mockery of realism, sat the upper halves of store window dummies, their heads turned attentively toward the throne and open door, as if frozen in the act of anticipating his entrance.

"Hello, my pretties." Nastiness dribbled from his mouth almost as real as saliva. "General Travers, how are you? Does the three million your wife will receive . . . and spend on someone else . . . compensate for being dead? You shouldn't have cancelled my trip to Berlin simply because of the stories you heard about the girls. Now you know what stories can do, don't you, general? And you should never, never have called me 'that nasty little homunculus, crippled in mind as well as body.' That was very naughty, general." Wes laughed softly. "But now you know."

Except for the uniform jacket and jaunty, starred cap, the dummy wasn't really a good likeness of the general. A mossy mustache and scraggly crepe hair eyebrows converted a standard, vacuous mannikin into a faint semblance of the man. But it satisfied Wes Pepper. With his good hand he flipped the figure a mock salute.

He turned to the blonde dummy opposite. "Velma, dear, I know you're used to more practiced embraces, but I don't think you'll laugh quite so shrilly at a crippled foot and an

awkward arm next time. Oh, I forget. There won't be a next time, will there?"

He bowed almost formally to a palpably grayed and artificially bearded dummy. "Ah, and you, Fritz. You found it quite difficult to prove that all that money in the Swiss bank was legitimate profit, not Nazi loot, didn't you? Of course, if you hadn't referred to me as a withered arm grubbing for a pay-off, I might not have printed those stories. Very carefully worded, weren't they, Fritz? Absolutely no chance of a libel suit there. Now neither of us has the money. Too bad..."

"And you, my darling Clare..." With careful, mocking courtesy he went around the table, speaking to each dummy, patting one, adjusting the hair of another, brushing dust from the shoulder of a third, and on back, to stand by the throne, looking down the table, taking malevolent delight in the fact that the dummies had no legs.

He pointed at last to the thirteenth chair, grinning viciously. "In a short time now, you will all have a new companion. I do not think Chuck Barnes will enjoy returning from space a discredited hero, with an unfaithful wife." He laughed so that he had to cling to the throne. "Oh, it may take time, but when he gets there, I'll tell him why. Just because he is a perfect physical specimen, fit for space, he didn't have to laugh when I fumbled with the seat harness...or lift me down like a child, saying, 'Mind that foot.'...So..." Saliva dribbled from Pepper's chin and he wiped it away absently with his good hand. "so he will join us soon."

Wes Pepper waved almost jauntily at his strange and morbid guests. "I'm going now to write the first of the columns about Chuck Barnes, out in space, while his wife dallies in the arms of his best friend. I'll read it to you," he promised with grim humor. "You'll be the first to hear."

It was midnight before he returned, dragging his ungainly boot, his withered arm drooped at his side, pinioning a sheaf of paper. With his good hand he pushed open the door and flipped the switch. The gaudy chandelier sprang into

splintering brilliance, throwing odd streaks of light and shadow across the twelve mannikin faces, so that, momentarily, they gave the effect of life.

And what were the champagne glasses doing in front of each of his—friends? It was a nice touch. Really, he should have thought of it sooner, except that he didn't remember. . .

Wes limped from the door to the high back of the throne, catching himself on its richly carved wood. He started to swing into his usual place and then drew back, startled, before the benign smile of Owen Matthews. A thirteenth dummy? Seated on the throne that rightfully belonged to Wes Pepper? He swallowed dryness, trying to remember when he had set up the mannikin of Owen Matthews.

"You're dead." He got the words out, a dry, rustling whisper.

Owen Matthews nodded with courtly acknowledgement. "Yes, Wes. You killed me. With that monstrous attack on Chuck Barnes. You must have known I'd never let you print it. Unfortunately, my heart couldn't stand the shock. It has taken so much from you, Wes. So terribly much."

"You're dead." Wes tried to clear his throat of rasping phlegm.

Owen Matthews nodded, his kindly face etched with sorrow. "Yes. So I came. To join your little company. To apologize. To make amends, if that is possible. I was very weak. Wes, to let you torment me into publishing your filth. A very weak man."

That was the kind of talk Wes understood, humbleness before his power. He was feeling better, stronger. He shrugged. "You didn't have much choice, did you?"

"Oh, but I did. And I made a poor one." Owen Matthews sighed. "As I've been telling your—guests."

Wes laughed. "Guests? Dummies! Mannikins! Look! You're talking to dummies. . ." He swept his hand down the table, and then stared. Don Stoddard was smiling at him, a wise, gently mocking smile.

*Dummies didn't smile!* Wes forced himself to look from face to face, his throat constricting. The general's mustache was no longer mousy but bristling, shifting as his lips moved

in a wide, welcoming grin. Fritz Kleiber was combing his fingers upward through his beard, a remembered gesture. Velma Blayne raised wide blue eyes, her soft mouth curving into a smile. Slowly Charles Furness raised clasped hands, shaking them over his head.

"No! No! You can't laugh at Wes Pepper! Even with a crippled foot and a withered arm, I'm better than you! Bigger than you! I proved it! You're dead. You're all dead! And I'm alive. I'm alive!"

Owen Matthews gestured to the foot of the long table. "Your usual seat, Wes. The thirteenth chair..."

Slowly, dragging his ungainly boot, Wes Pepper moved down the table, fighting fear. The heads swivelled silently to follow his limping progress, Fritz Kleiber nodding in an off-beat rhythm that marked Wes Pepper's halting steps, Velma, her luscious lower lips caught in her teeth, suppressing one of her bubbling laughs, Mark Travers leaning on crossed arms, his steady gray eyes following Wes.

Beside the thirteenth chair Wes halted, suddenly furious with himself for being subjected to this humiliation. In this house, his proper seat was at the head of the table, on the curved throne, dominating all these lesser things. He threw back his head, challengingly.

And Owen Matthews stood up, reaching for his glass of champagne.

The others were rising, taking their glasses. But they couldn't be rising. *They had no legs. No legs!*

Owen Matthews extended the champagne glass toward him, and the others lifted theirs, turning to Wes Pepper in a curious, vacuous silence.

Then he heard Owen Matthews' rich, welcoming voice. "Join us, Wes."

His knees were buckling. Wes caught at the arm of the thirteenth chair, folding slowly into it, gasping. He could feel the shrivelling in his legs, so agonizingly fast he barely had time to glance down and see that they were gone. Only the upper half of a man! He started to scream but coldness caught him, freezing him in a grimace of protest. And his eyes stared out, unseeing, at his thirteen guests.

The maid came in with her duster as usual for a Friday, twitching pettishly at the mannikins, muttering her litany of complaints. At the thirteenth chair she paused, sniffing huffily. "More work, more work."

She gave the dummy a perfunctory brushing.

"Looks like Mister hisself, some'at."

She stooped, grumbling, to pick up the scattered blank papers.

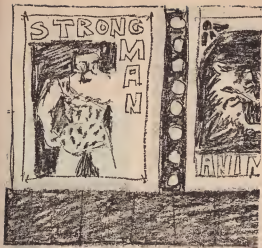
"Such a mess. That man ain't got no consideration..."





HOUSE  
OF  
MIRRORS  
←  
INFERNO





# *upon reflection*

*There's a fatal lesson to be learned here. Even if you can't stand your wife, be careful how you get rid of her.*

UPON REFLECTION

WILBUR TRIMBLE WAS reflecting upon his fourteenth method of the evening for killing his wife. Reflecting was all. However pleasant her demise might make life, Wilbur simply reflected on it, a pleasant diversion while she was talking.

Long ago he had heard all she had to say. Irma, he occasionally told himself in secret and rather tired jest, was a woman of few words, but she used them over and over.

But that was the story of her life. She also used leftovers at every meal, until the dishes tasted bleak and weary with being re-cooked. They hadn't even been well prepared in the first place. Irma was not an outstanding cook.

Tonight, for instance, had seen the third (or was it fourth?) resurrection of a leg of lamb, reappearing in the guise of croquettes, heavily breaded and dismally soggy.

Forgetting his usual caution, Wilbur had mentioned this fourth reincarnation, and now he was getting the result.

"Wilbur Trimble, I will not tolerate complaints. I simply will not tolerate them. I will not tolerate your complaints, Wilbur. I scrimp and save and work my fingers to the bone, and that's all the thanks I get. Trying to make out on that miserable pittance you bring home from the shoe store. Never again will I even mention that miserable pittance you bring home. Not a word about it will ever cross my lips again, Wilbur, but that miserable pittance from the shoe store! Really, even with all the scrimping and saving I do, working my fingers to the bone, I just can't manage on that miserable pittance..."

Somewhere along there Wilbur lost count of the pittances she would never mention again. Actually, it wasn't such a pittance. The shoe store did quite well and gave them a better income than Irma had ever known from her drunken father or her own inept efforts as a stenographer.

Wilbur also, happily, lost count of the number of times she had worked her fingers to the bone. They were remarkably pudgy for all of that. And of the number of his "complaints" and her infinite patience tolerating them. Instead, he had withdrawn into contemplation of a highly novel and diverting method of killing Irma by a mildly Rube Goldbergish contraption attached to her chin, the forward and

most aggressive of several, that would, in turn, operate a ratchet that tightened a noose.

He discarded the thought as impractical. At some point, he calculated, the noose would cut off the power, probably at a crucial juncture. He was just devising a complex guillotine with an electronic ear that triggered a mechanism on the third repetition of a word when Irma's high, nasal whine penetrated again.

"I just simply will not tolerate complaints. I will not tolerate them."

"You're repeating yourself, Irma." Wilbur was rather surprised at his own daring, even though he'd said it mildly and so softly he was sure she hadn't heard.

But with that built-in radar of non-stop talkers for capturing the only words you don't intend them to hear, Irma caught it. She gasped. When she gasped, she did it fully, with resonant sound effects and a swelling of the pouter-pigeon bosom. "*Criticism!* Now I get *criticisms*. Really, Wilbur! First, complaints and now criticism. I simply will not tolerate criticism, Wilbur."

Wilbur unplugged his mental hearing aid and retired into a private world of reflection in which he invented a self-activating *garrote*, learned *thuggee*, and was just mastering the art of strangulation by using a *bolo* when he realized, faintly, that the subject had changed. It was not always possible to tell. Irma's every pronouncement, from an announced departure for groceries to an account of the latest gruesome newspaper accident, for which she had a special melancholy affection, was couched in the same thin, nasal monotone, dominated by a whine.

"...so don't tell me I've got to go to a carnival, Wilbur. Don't come in here and just tell me out flat something like that. I won't do it, Wilbur, won't do it, that's all, definitely won't."

"Carnival?"

"Yes carnival. That carnival you told me about. Remember that carnival, saying I've got to go to a silly carnival?"

Wilbur sighed and came back to the present, his dreams

of flying bolo knives and deadly vipers evaporating into the reality of Irma's prattle. "Not carnival, Irma. *Gymkhana*. They're raising money to help Christianize the Africans. It's called a gymkhana."

"Don't mess with me, Wilbur. It's a carnival is what it is. Pure and simple. Carnival. I'm not going."

"So don't go, Irma. I bought the tickets to help charity. We'll throw them away."

"Throw them away? Oh God, that's like you Wilbur. I sit here and scrimp and save and you throw money out the window. You're a moron, Wilbur, that's what you are. Do you know that?"

Irma was right. The gymkhana *was* a carnival with a fancy name. Irma complained, complained, complained, but Wilbur loved it.

He was childishly fond of all the gay, bright lights and swirls of people and the wonderful mysteries of the tents where any oddity of wondrous curiosity might lurk, and the swooping delights of the carnival rides, even though they were, for this occasion, *gymkhana* rides, and the raucous blasts of music. It was bright, glittery and blaringly noisy.

One reason he liked the blaring music was that it so thoroughly drowned out Irma's nasal whine he didn't have to bother to tune her out.

He could give his whole being, instead, to rich enjoyment. The twinkle of lights, the enticing smells of hot dogs, buttery popcorn, spun-sugar candy, candy-apples and the false but woodsy smell of sawdust lured him with happy nostalgia for what had been, actually, a rather narrow, uninteresting childhood.

Instead, the colored lights, the rich, mingling fragrances, the gaudy, clattering wheels, the rowdy, compelling voices of pitchmen, the enticing mysteries of the tents, the screams and giggles of those on the whirling, pitching rides gave him the illusion of a full, rich childhood, crowded with wonders.

Actually, it was a tawdry little carnival, even rechristened gymkhana for the night. And Irma was criticizing it. Wilbur was not hearing her though he made a special point when facing her (which was as rare as he could make it and

still be convincing) of looking at her bulgy pudding of a face and oddly thin, pursy mouth just to give the illusion (at which he had become adept) of listening.

Irma, in her usual bull-charge rush, plowed through the crowds, Wilbur following meekly in her wake. Those who knew her and were fortunate enough to see her first, wisely side-stepped Irma's plunging progress.

Tonight Irma harangued more than her usual quota of innocent bystanders and finally collided with the rather wispy sexton who was in charge of the evening's entertainment. Even while she was setting him on his feet, Irma was telling him what was wrong with the gymkhana and the overall operation of the church which sponsored it.

Wilbur used that diversion to slip away. Irma probably would not even notice. Finished temporarily with the sexton, she would undoubtedly resume her lunging rush, trailing her nasal voice over her shoulder at Wilbur without looking back.

So he got to see the Fire-Eater, skipped the Fat Lady as too reminiscent of Irma, enjoyed a contortionist and a sword swallower, and stood in childish, wide-eyed delight before a magician who did amazing things with an excessively dingy deck of cards and some rather grimy silks. He lost two dollars on Wheel of Fortune but at Ring Toss, surprisingly, won a large blue plush poodle. This evidence of his bacchanal he hastily gave to a rather startled and grateful little girl, and marched on to new delights, gulping stickily at a pink cone of spun-sugar candy.

Wilbur gradually lost himself in wonder, in unquestioning acceptance of this world of marvels. He was a child again, believing in, or almost believing in, or at least willing to believe in, the leprechaun that jerkily turned the popcorn machine, the Talking Head Without A Body, the submerged Mermaid even though her tail was a bit shopworn and a number of scales were missing, the Spider Girl despite an obvious resemblance to the magician's assistant, and the Half-Man Half-Woman even though that faintly embarrassed him.

He was surprised and just a bit amused to find, even

though tucked away in an obscure and dimly lit alley, a ride at a church gymkhana called *Inferno*. Wilbur, who was beginning to loosen up all over, privately renamed it, in behalf of several bretheven he could think of, the *PreView*.

He offered the toll to an alluring young female devil in very black tights, a most sinuously twisting tail and brightly polished brass horns, quite sure she would not be around for the second evening's entertainment after a few of the more churchly members saw her. Smiling archly, and lifting one eyebrow most provocatively, she refused his money. "For you it's free, Mister Trimble. Every ten thousandth customer rides free. And you are one in ten thousand." With a sly, amused smile and a quaint ducking of her head, she waved him into the rickety little car.

It lurched off, seemed about to collide violently with some menacing brass doors, then, just at the moment of impact, they opened and gulped Wilbur Trimble and the rickety car.

Inside was as black as The Pit. Then quite realistic flames leapt up and a score of pitchforks, seeming to drip fire, thrust at him, barely missing him, while demoniacal laughter shivered Wilbur's spine. Even though Wilbur Trimble was quite sure the flames were gauze streamers cleverly dyed and lit, the pitchforks controlled by a secure and unfailing mechanism and the screams and rather horrid background noises were a tape recording, probably stereophonic, nevertheless, he shivered. He told himself, firmly and bravely, that's what the ride was meant to do. Make you shiver.

Seemingly right through the flames a bright red devil in a shopworn costume stepped aboard the rickety car and sat down. "Your escort for the journey."

The devil was an entertaining and witty companion, pointing a small, glowing pitchfork at the various niches in which realistic wax dummies writhed in convincing and varied torment. Occasionally the devil used his barbed tail to point to a particularly interesting scene. "The sanctimonious sinners. We have a special section for them."

Some of the niches portrayed tortures that Wilbur felt were vaguely familiar. A self-activating *garrote*. A diabolically ingenious slicing machine that snipped innumerable





pieces off an interminable tongue.

"You've been most helpful. Really, at times I am astonished at your ingenuity, Mister Trimble. And your versatility. We've been able to apply a number of your ideas. With improvements, of course. Ours are endlessly repetitious, naturally. We have to be, in our trade. While yours are so final."

The shopworn devil stepped off the rickety car and walked alongside, over what was apparently a bed of red hot coals. "Lis en, Mr. Trimble. To do it properly, it must be done tonight." The devil smiled engagingly, flipped his barbed tail in farewell, and disappeared behind a strip of black canvas.

Totally confused, Wilbur emerged from the blackness of The Pit into glaring lights and almost collided with the pimply face of a youth. The cute little female devil had been replaced, as Wilbur had suspected she would be.

"Hey, mister. You gotta pay for that cigaret burn." The pimply youth was pointing accusingly to the seat beside Wilbur, scorched and still smoking. Even as he watched, the last wisp of smoke trailed away.

Before the youth's skeptical and accusing glare, Wilbur paid rather than create a scene. Still, he resented having to pay for a burn obviously made by the escort inside, an employee. Though, to be quite truthful, he hadn't noticed the devil smoking, either.

In fact, now that he thought of it, there were several rather odd things about that ride. Of course, at a church festival a reasonably prominent member of the congregation could expect to be recognized. And a number of the younger members were handling the concessions. Even so, to be spoken to by name. . .

Wilbur carried the slight unease with him into the Hall of Mirrors, where he felt he should have been enjoying the fantastic distortions of himself, here squat with apelike arms, there so thin and attenuated, in another a round little balloon of a man.

Once he thought he caught a reflection of the devil, but that was unlikely. And a couple of times he felt mild

prickles, as if he were prodded with a pitchfork, which was nonsense. He was merely waking more than usual, and the prickles were protesting muscles.

However, they somehow guided him from the Hall of Mirrors into the Mirror Maze, where he saw himself endlessly repeated and several times bumped his nose on invisible walls.

Once he was thrust aside as a group of teenagers rushed recklessly through. They seemed a dozen or a thousand, multiplied by the mirrors, though he counted only three. One screamed advice to the others, pointing at the floor. "Watch the beading. . ." And ricocheted on.

Wilbur found that, by watching carefully for something called beading, a faintly visible molding that no doubt held the mirrors securely in place, he could quite easily spot the open passages.

After that his progress was rapid but the knowledge had, somehow, spoiled the effect. Wilbur enjoyed being diddled and baffled and mildly confused. It took him out of the present and gave him the illusion of childhood, when this Mirror Maze would indeed have been a wonder.

Then he saw Irma.

Not one Irma but dozens, hundreds, thousands, all coming at him, bulgy pudding face red with anger, small, pursy mouth working, no doubt with equally endless repetitions of her fancied injuries. He couldn't hear her yet above the din of blaring music and taped maniacal screams supplementing the real ones, but he knew, watching the thousand pursy mouths, that she was calling his name and hurling her stout, heavily corsetted body against mirrors and invisible walls, battling her way toward him, her face getting redder, her anger mounting.

He could have escaped. He knew the secret of the maze now. But an awful inertia gripped him, a paralysis akin, he supposed, to that of a rabbit before a snake.

Then she was on him, reaching fat, grasping fingers for his arm, screaming his name over and over. And words, words, words.

"Sneaking off. . . Sneaking. . . Sneaking. . . Sneaking. . . To

meet some woman. . . woman. . . woman. . ."

Her pudgy fingers lunged. Wilbur laughed. She had lunged at one of hundreds of reflections of him. Enraged, Irma swung and lunged again, colliding wheezily with a mirror. For a moment Wilbur enjoyed her bafflement and then he saw her face go purple with frustration, her fat fingers taut with rage.

Her back, her real back, not one of a thousand repetitious images, was toward him. All that he had endured from her, all that he had missed in what a wife should be, all the endless, nasal, whiney complaints, welled up, swamping him.

Wilbur placed two hands on her broad, meaty back and pushed.

The push coincided with her next lunge. Irma's hefty weight crashed into the mirror. It cracked, split through its middle, and then shattered into a thousand parts. Irma screamed, mingling it with the blaring music and the taped screams, and went down heavily.

Wilbur saw the bright slivers of glass go into her throat, stilling her scream, though there was no ebbing of the mad cacaphony.

Irma lay there a lump, a sodden heap, surrounded by hundreds of sodden Irmas, breathing raspishly, desperately in need of a doctor's help.

Wilbur looked down at her in mild pity. For so violently dynamic a woman she, and her hundreds of reflections, looked so completely helpless.

He glanced around, vaguely expecting a crowd to gather. But for some reason there was no crowd. Only Wilbur and Irma, endlessly repeated.

Wilbur shook himself. He had to get out of there, inform someone, get help. He glanced down, watching for the reading, and hurried to the exit.

Now he understood why there was no crowd in the Mirror Maze. The carnival had closed. The Mirror Maze attendant was gone and the lights were beginning to flicker out.

Wilbur started down the Midway, looking for someone to

help, feeling someone ought to know and do something. Irma, as anyone who knew her could tell, was always lunging her massive weight at people and things, so they'd understand how she could hurl herself at the baffling walls of the Mirror Maze.

Wilbur moved on down the Midway, more slowly now, strangely exhilarated, drinking in the last, lingering echoes of the carnival, sniffing at delicious fragrances, seeing, in the dwindling lights, more and more fascinating mysteries. It was, suddenly, quite like a dream.

He stopped then, savoring a new thought, testing it gingerly. If Irma died, he was free! Free! No more tired, repetitious meals. No more endlessly repetitive complaints.

It was an evil, delicious thought. Don't get a doctor, don't help Irma, and you're free!

Off to the right, Wilbur caught a flicker of movement. There in the shadows was his companion, the devil in the shopworn costume, waving his little pitchfork like a baton.

Wilbur stood riveted, watching the motion of the pitchfork. It was a faltering heartbeat, slowing, slowing, slowing.

*To hell with Irma! Let her die!*

The pitchfork came to an abrupt stop. The devil smiled, shook his head admiringly, gave Wilbur a jaunty salute and disappeared into the shadows and the dark haze of nothingness.

But who cared about that! Wilbur was free! Free! Whatever dark impulse had kept him from getting help, he was free! He was free of Irma. Free of Irma! Free of Irma! Over and over the deliriously heady thought repeated itself, building into the one simple truth; Irma was gone, dead, and he was free.

Free! He had let Irma die, and he was free!

Free! Free! Free!

It was only then that he looked behind him. It was only then that he saw the hulking, translucent form of Irma coming out of the Mirror Maze, marching in determined cadence, coming after him, coming after him in grim pursuit.

And behind her came Irma in grim pursuit.  
And behind her came Irma...and Irma...and Irma...and  
Irma, endlessly, grimly, repetitiously.



# ARE YOU GOING BALD

## Needlessly?

The Terrible Truth Is That Many  
Thousands Of Men (You Yourself  
Perhaps) Are Losing Their Hair Forever  
... WHEN THEY DON'T HAVE TO!



FOR MEN  
AND WOMEN

It's a fact FORMULA 101, a NEW scalp formulation, can stop falling hair fast—in its hairless. FORMULA 101 is presently under the supervision of one of America's foremost pharmacologists and was thoroughly tested by a leading medical testing laboratory.

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We are so proud of our FORMULA 101 and so certain of its ability to stop falling hair and prevent baldness as described in this advertisement that we do hereby state in sworn statement before a notary of the State of New York that, to anyone who is disappointed for any reason, we will refund the full purchase price, plus \$1.00 extra, upon return of the unused portion.

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Free sample and literature of amazing new FORMULA 101 will be sent with no cost to any doctor, druggist, chemist or other medical institution concerned with male alopecia. Please make such requests on official letterhead.

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If you prefer C.O.D. shipment, send \$2.00 with this coupon and pay the balance of \$1.00 plus delivery charges on arrival.

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# mommy. mommy-

*Stevie's childish fantasies start working overtime. He's certain his Mommy's a robot. And then again, maybe she isn't. But maybe she IS! Well, let's settle it, once and for all!*



# you're a robot!!

Stevie was concentrating on the bike, to keep it from wobbling. It was a very new, very bright Schwinn Special, with 28-inch wheels a little big for a ten-year-old, but simply super. And Stevie's heart had gone out to it, his nose pressed against the window, hope swimming in his eyes. Dad had bought it. And now Mom—with a long list of instructions



about traffic and people—and a sigh—had let him ride into the village.

His first bike ride! It had taken hours of Dad's patient coaching and many turns around the back yard.

His steering was a little unsteady, but he was doing all right, for his first real ride. It took lots of concentration, so he didn't see the sturdy, belligerent little figure, fists on hips, move directly into his path.

The bike jounced around, tilted and shot out from under Stevie. He lit on his feet, lightly, balanced, but dismayed. He'd been doing so well.

"New kid!" The belligerent little figure said it so scornfully Stevie looked up from his inspection of the precious Schwinn Special.

"Yeah." He grinned at the stormy little face. "We just moved in here."

"Tryin' to shove people around, just 'cause you're new!"

The fist stung Stevie's nose before he ever knew the fight was on. Then he stepped back, into a light crouch, chin tucked in, one fist cocked, protecting his chin, the other weaving, darting out, feeling.

Then Wham! The belligerent figure shook its head and came in flailing.

Stevie weaved aside and slammed one against the ear, then quick, one-two right under the ribs. And then a right cross that landed, solid and thwacking, on the chin.

And the belligerent little figure was sitting, spraddle legged, belligerence replaced by surprise verging on tears.

"Nuff!" Stevie danced easily around and back, looking down, his fists cocked, always in slight motion.

The now un-belligerent figure rolled half over and started to get up, eyeing the weaving fists. It settled back down. "Nuff!"

Suddenly inexplicably, there was a grin. "I'm Jimmy. Jimmy Wharton."

"I'm Stevie Bellamy." Stevie dropped his fists.

Ritual observed, Jimmy scrambled to his feet, dusting automatically but not very thoroughly at his small bottom.

He even reached down and helped right Stevie's bicycle, his eyes admiring it.

"That's a mean right cross you've got, son." A real old man, maybe fifty or a hundred, even, in neat, sun-bleached khaki pants and old army shirt twinkled at Stevie and nodded casually to Jimmy. "You've got a style like Gene Tunney, boy."

"Hi, Mister Bob." Jimmy beamed toothily at the old man.

"Who's Gene Tunney?" Stevie asked.

"World Champion. Best boxer ever in the ring." Mister Bob laughed. "Son, I'm just getting old. Tunney wouldn't mean a thing to your generation." He shifted a bundle and held the bike steady while Stevie concentrated briefly on trying to balance it again. "I 'spect your Daddy taught you how to box?"

"I guess so." Stevie wasn't going to say he didn't remember his Daddy ever teaching him to box. Studying the bike, he solved the dilemma of starting all over, the hard part. He shoved it at Jimmy. "You want to ride?"

"Geeee-whillikers! You mean it? On a new Schwinn Special?" Before too many questions involved him in denial, Jimmy had flung himself into the saddle and pedalled furiously off, swinging wide around a bus.

Stevie fell into an easy walk alongside Mister Bob, watching Jimmy. The bus snorted fumes and moved off. Stevie stared and then looked at the street, then up at Mister Bob. "What happened to the big red street cars?"

"Why, they took up the tracks ten-fifteen years ago. Before you were born, probably." Mister Bob tousled the thatch of hair and grinned. "I guess that Dad of yours talked so much about this town..."

*But Stevie remembered!* He could see pictures of the big red cars. Different and bigger than other street cars, and a dull, old-barn red. They circled a white gingerbreadly bandstand before heading back to town.

But no, that wasn't right. There was no bandstand. In its place there was a sort of small wall of pinkish brown stone

and a bronze heron spouting water into a pool. The bus was just rounding it, heading back to town. And Jimmy came lunging back on the Schwinn Special, arms uncertainly up.

"Look! No hands."

The bike hit a bump and he grabbed wildly at the handlebars, righted it and drew up beside them with a flourish.

Mister Bob chuckled. "Another stunt like that and it'll be—'Look, ma—no cavities—cause I got no teeth.' How about a sundae?" He aimed his package at the drugstore.

It was shinier and newer than Stevie had expected. And the wire-back chairs were gone. Instead, there were bright tan booths, and shiny-topped formica tables.

"Okay, boys, what'll it be. My treat."

Jimmy pointed instantly to a mountainous picture of a banana split. "That."

Stevie thought it over slowly. "Could I have a vanilla 'n' chocolate, with caramel and marshmallow and whipped cream?" He looked up uncertainly at the bonney, bright blonde pony-tailed waitress. "With strawberries on it?"

Mister Bob shook his head, not meaning No. "Well, I guess a boy who's pulled through scarlet fever and pneumonia all at once can battle his own bellyaches. Sure your mom won't mind?"

"She lets me..." and then Stevie couldn't really remember whether she did or not. In a way, this seemed a sort of first time, and then again he could remember having vanilla 'n' chocolate with. . .

He nodded vigorously.

It wasn't really a bellyache, but he didn't have much of an appetite at supper and his attack on the green-apple pie was almost perfunctory, so much so that Daddy raised an inquiring eyebrow, grinning slightly. "Too much bike? Or too much Schwartz' soda fountain?"

"It's Bain's now, Dad. And I guess maybe vanilla 'n' chocolate with caramel and marshmallow and whipped cream—with strawberries, *is* kinda filling."

Mom shuddered and Dad laughed. "That used to fill me

up, too. When I could raise a quarter, which wasn't very often, in those days."

"And a good thing," Mom said firmly. "And eight o'clock is your bed time, young man."

Stevie wanted to protest, to make the ritual fight to stay up—just half an hour, but he was really too tired. And his own big, breeze-swept room with the big bed and cool sheets seemed very inviting. He trudged upstairs, slower and slower and made it, yawning as he stripped off the T-shirt, wriggled out of his levis and underpants and got half way into pajamas before he toppled over. Not really asleep. Just tired and relaxed.

And tried to remember the mixed up remembering, only it got all jumbled up with other memories—bright shiny rooms and people in silvery clothes moving decisively—and machines—lots of machines that clicked and winked and murmured—and himself, floating through. Not touching the floor. Just—floating. Floating. Floating. And finally he was asleep.

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Air Space Commander Stephan Bellamy peered intently at the dials of the space ship console, listening to the click of relays, the faultless purring of the giant engines. With unshaking hands he adjusted his helmet and poised steady fingers over the twin firing buttons that would unleash a blast of super-disintegrating ray at the pirate ship seen in silhouette on his subetheric radar. Count down! "...four, three, two, one...contact!" A bright flash of light—and the dark raider vanished from the screen.

Air Space Lieutenant James Wharton clapped both hands against the plastic of his space helmet, gasping "Ker-boooooom! And that old space pirate just...dis-in-ter...just went ker-boooooom!" And young Jimmy rolled off his stool, kicking his heels and dying horrifically. "Those old pirates sure got it."

Jimmy sat up, tugging at the Air Space Commander's tattered and faded blue jeans. "Let me be captain, huh? Wih yuh? And I'll show you how to vector in on somethin'."

Stevie glanced down scornfully. "You gotta be a Nair

Space Commander..." He tapped the four blazing meteors stamped on his bubble helmet... "with 30 years service." Seeing Jimmy's round, freckled face cloud up, Stevie sighed. "Okay. We make a special section in your case..." and lifted off his helmet.

Over the space ships' intercom—the door to Stevie's room was open—came a solemn, intoning voice. "Now hear this. Now hear this! Galley to Captain's quarters. Pepsi and crublers now being served."

With whoops, Air Space Commander Stephen Bellamy and Air Space Lieutenant James Wharton jettisoned space helmets, abandoned a mighty space ship in orbit around the dark planet of Dench and jammed hieflly together at the airlock, before plummeting to earth in the Bellamy kitchen.

Anna Bellamy, face flushed from the stove, stared at them, sighing. "How two high ranking officers can get their faces dirty *inside* space helmets is more than... Stevie! At least wash your *hands*. You, too, Jimmy." She smiled, shaking her head. "You might have some radioactive meteor dust on 'em."

In a not very enthusiastic scramble for soap and face cloths Air Space Commander Bellamy poked a skinny elbow in Air Space Lieutenant Wharton's ribs and got, in return, a thudding bump on the rump from Air Force Lieutenant Wharton's boney hip. Air Space Commander Bellamy's face cloth made a satisfactorily solid "whop" across Air Space Lieutenant Wharton's chin.

Then Anna Bellamy was between them, an Air Space Officer's ear in each hand. "For that, you wash *faces*, too."

"I smell doughnuts," announced a shrill voice at the back door. As Anna Bellamy thrust two recent Space Officers toward the sink.

"*Faces, too!*" She made it an ultimatum and went to unlatch the screen door, looking down at the small figure in torn T-shirt and dingy and very brief red shorts hooked precariously on skinny, barely perceptible hips.

Anna shook her head, sighing. "Tommy, how is it you always show up..."

Tommy, aged six, beamed up at her. "My mommy says I got a nose like a beetle!" Proudly he touched a miniscule nubbin.

"I suspect she said 'beagle,' but come on in. And Jeannie!.. How did you know...?"

"I just follow him." Jeannie, in shrunken and faded levis that seemed, even on her narrow hips, a trifle tight for sitting, marched in behind Tommy. The oversized, gaudily striped T-shirt eddied around her lath-straight ten-year-old figure as she whirled to look uncertainly on the late Space Officers washing.

"She's a *girl*!" Stevie announced this offensive truth as if it disqualified her for the human race.

Jeannie shook a brief mop of hair. "I'm not. I just haven't made up my mind." She smiled with shy wisdom at Anna Bellamy. "It's nicer *before* you decide, isn't it?"

Anna Bellamy made a great business of setting out a large platter of crullers. "I expect it is, Jeannie. Thought I don't remember that as one of my problems. You, Jeannie, there. Tommy. Jimmie. And you, Stevie, there." She moved around, setting out glasses, reaching almost wearily for the bottles in the refrigerator.

Across half a cruller and through a rim of powdered sugar Stevie grinned at her. "Gee, Mom, these are super."

She returned his grin and added a wink for good measure, moving with renewed briskness. "Tommy can have two. The rest of you..." She shook her head despairingly. "There's only a dozen. That can't kill you."

"Mizzus Turner is baking gooseberry pie," Tommy announced shrilly, grabbing a doughnut and heading for the screen door.

As the door slammed, Anna winced. "Well, with a nose like a beagle, the appetite of an anaconda and the digestion of an ostrich, he'll make an interesting zoo when he grows up."

Jeannie giggled. "Your Mommy's funny."

... "Natch." Stevie accepted what he was sure was a compliment and reached for a doughnut.

"And his Daddy made a sure-enough almost-for-real space

ship with jen-u-wine simmer-lated..." having gotten over that verbal hurdle, Jimmy rushed on..." "with subspace radio and subetheric radar and force field ray guns and..."

Seeing he was about to miss out on a doughnut, Jimmy put first things first and outgrabbed Jeannie, with direct, ten-year-old chivalry. "His Daddy's a nuclear fizz-izz-izzixt," he ended triumphantly, almost on target.

Without disparaging the sure-enough almost-for-real space ship, Stevie pulled the conversation back to matters of more importance. "But Mom makes better doughnuts."

"I rode in a space ship once," Jimmy announced, doing his best not to strangle on doughnut, Pepsi and conversation. "A real one."

Stevie cut his eyes around in disgust and reached for another doughnut. "Phooo-ey."

"I did. I really did."

Jeannie nibbled daintily at a doughnut, as befitted a ten-year-old-almost-decided-to-be-a-girl, and leaned scarred elbows on the table. "When?" Her gaze was disconcertingly direct.

"When I came here. From Omicron."

Stevie smeared the tip of his nose with powdered sugar and tried to lick it off. "Where's Omicron?"

Jimmy contorted himself in the chair, pointing high over his left shoulder. "There. Way out. In the Outer Galaxie. A million quatrillion billion miles away." He spread his arms, extending his skinny chest as much as possible to show the vast distance. "Or maybe farther. We hadda come faster than light to even get here at all."

"Where is it now?" Stevie discovered a clutch of crumbs on his elbow and leaned far out, his tongue wagging, reaching.

"You'll turn into a girl" Jeannie warned him.

Stevie looked at his elbow suspiciously. "Is that how you did it?"

Jeannie shook her head. "That's the way I was borned. But if you kiss your elbow..."

"I was licking..."

"And when we hit the atmosphere, the ship got so hot it almost burned up only it was made of in-dis-trunkt... very hard stuff." Jimmy had successfully edged back into the conversation.

Stevie snorted. "If it's so indistructible, where is it now?"

Jimmy scrootched around in his chair again, pointing. "In Absolute Swamp."

Jeannie and Stevie both nodded. Anything that fell in Absolute Swamp was lost forever. Stevie laid broken bits of doughnut out in a pattern, debating which piece to eat first. "What were you doing on Omicron?"

"I got borned there," Jimmy said indignantly. "And when my wicked uncle tried to seize power and kill me, my Mom and Dad took me in a space ship and..."

"Your daddy owns Wharton's Hardware Store," Jeannie told him firmly.

"Oh, he's not my real dad. My real Mom and Dad were killed when the space ship crashed. And Mister Wharton found me and 'dopted me. And some day I'm gonna get me a great big huge immense magnet and go out and pull up that old space ship and go back to Omicron and take over the government and put my wicked uncle in prison and I'll be Emperor. Only I think I'll make it a republic and be President."

"Oh, let's go hunt dinosaurs," Jeannie said. She dropped a doughnut down the front of Jimmy's T-shirt and grabbed another, waving a generous hand at the remaining two.

Thus provisioned, the safari set out after dinosaurs, in the shape of sun-dozing lizards, a belligerent hedgehog or two, and Mr. Axelgren's heifer calf, which was an adequate substitute for a herd of charging buffalo, the game having changed subtly somewhere along the route.,

Anna Bellamy, in the pleasant half dark behind drawn blinds, eased herself down into the special leather chair Gerald had gotten her and lay back, resting her head in just the most comfortable position, sighing wearily. She listened, through the half open door to the children, smiling. That Jimmy! What an imagination the child had! His very cas-



ualness made it seem so vividly real.

Her breath caught in a sudden lurch that shook her. Just suppose. . . She shook her head. Oh, it couldn't be true! It just couldn't be. And yet. . . ? She'd ask Gerald, tonight if it was possible.

Finally, she reached down and touched the concealed button on the chair, and felt the soothing waves come up, washing over her. Absorbing the waves, feeling the welcome surges, she sank back. Stevie was saying something about dinosaurs out in the yard. Drowsily she smiled, loving him, loving them all. She glanced down her length, stretched in the chair, small, but full-bodied, a womanly woman, Gerald had called her, made for loving, giving love, radiating love. It was—nice—to—know. Her eyes closed and she gave herself up to the chair and its magical waves.

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Mister Bob lived at the very edge of town, in a neat but battered trailer that was, at various times, The Flying Dutchman, the Batmobile, the Starship "Taurus," Captain Nemo's "Nautilus," Lunar Station Two and the Wells-Fargo Stage. It was, as Mister Bob said, versatile.

And it contained the most magical things, things any boy loved to handle, to touch, just to know, with awe, that he had touched them. Sand that actually came from Mars! Very ordinary looking sand, but the fact that it came from Mars made it very special. And a piece of horny stuff that was one of the claws of the Fabulous Roc that carried off Sinbad. A length of string, the very string that Theseus had laid through the Labyrinth to find his way back after he killed the Minotaur. Also a tattered, tarnished tassel from The Singing Sword.

All those marvelous things, and Mister Bob just kept them jumbled up in a drawer or scattered in old boxes under the sink. Sometimes he didn't even seem to remember he had them, or what they were, until you asked, or there was a story going. And suddenly he remembered, smiling so gently you forgot how terribly old he was, fifty maybe, or even a hundred.

It wasn't just that Mister Bob told wonderful stories. He

*listened. Really listened.* Not the way parents did, with a smile, which was nice, of course. But Mister Bob really *listened*. He was right there in the story with you—not taking it and telling it, but just helping, nudging you a little, until the story got better and more real. Like he was listening to Jeannie, even if she was a girl.

"...n they kidnapped me when I was a teen-eeenay baby. There was this gypsy..."

"With a gold ring in one ear?" suggested Mister Bob.

Jeannie stared, open-mouthed. "Did you know him?"

"Hmmm." Mister Bob rubbed his left ear with a big, lumpy knuckle. "Ring in his left ear, eh? 'Could be I met him. Long time ago, though. Mean as a skunk he was. Got in a fight with an Ay-rab, he did. And the Ay-rab cut off his ear. Left ear." Mister Bob snapped his fingers, his blue eyes all twinkly. "And it seems to me I kept that ring. Ear sort of dried up and blew away."

Jeannie, awed, whispered softly. "Do you still have the ring? I mean—could I see it? Maybe I'd recognize it. Of course, I was kinda young. Just a baby, but..."

Mister Bob nodded, puckering up his walnut-brown face. "Now, let me see. Ring? Gypsy ring?" His twinkly eyes roved over the inside of the trailer and he got up, slowly. "I'll just take a look."

And then he was back and sure enough, there was the ring, battered and crusted with age. If it looked suspiciously like an old curtain ring, the suspicion vanished as soon as Jeannie saw it.

Her eyes went round and just a little scared, as if she hadn't really believed Mister Bob had known the gypsy, much less the ring. One small, dirty finger pointed. "Is that—blood? From where the Ay-rab cut off his ear?"

"Now, I wouldn't say no—and I wouldn't say yes. Be kinda hard to tell, after all these years, without all kinds of tests. And gypsy blood, well, that's pretty hard to tell, anyways."

"Could I hold it?" Jeannie turned up a small, dingy paw and then stared at the ring for so long she seemed to forget the story. Almost reverently she handed it back. "Jee-menetty!" Her voice was small, almost doubtful. "He sold

me to some people, and they sold me to my Mommy and Daddy, only, of course they're not, but I really, truly love them, and when I'm a princess again, I'm going to give them each a palace for their very own selves..."

"Make it just one palace," Mister Bob advised. "People who're married don't really want two palaces."

Jeannie considered that with great deliberation. "P'raps you're right. One palace, and scads of diamonds. And I'll wear a crown, all goldy, and simply beautiful, beautiful dresses." She smiled dreamily at Mister Bob and vaguely at Stevie and Jimmy. "Isn't it funny how you just *know* you're a princess in disguise?"

"Stevie and me went to Mars today," Jimmy announced. "Only it wasn't for real, like in my space ship—the one that landed..." Jimmy contorted his whole small body to point, "...over in Absolute Swamp." Jimmy swung back. "It came down—kerploooooosh!"

"HMMMMM." Mister Bob nodded. "So *that* was it?"

Jimmy's eyes widened, waiting breathless for confirmation he knew was coming. "Did you really see it fall?"

Mister Bob shook his head sadly, as if he really regretted having missed the event. "Can't rightly say I *saw* it. Felt the jar, though. Shook the dishes in the trailer. Fact is, cracked one cup right bad."

"Can I get it? Can I show it to Stevie? Can I? He's never seen the cup my space ship broked. Can I?"

Mister Bob knuckled an ear, studying. "Now, where would that cup be?" He looked up, eyes twinkly and bright. "Might try the top shelf. On the left. Over the sink. Only be mighty careful. That cup's sorta fragile..."

Jimmy came back, bearing the cup like a chalice, holding it out for Stevie to see, his eyes cutting back to Mister Bob. "Could he touch it?"

At Mister Bob's slow, considering nod, Stevie put out a finger and touched the rim of the cup. It was a sure enough cup, with a genuine crack in it. He felt awed and a little humble for having doubted Jimmy, and decided Jimmy could be captain twice as long next time, because he'd have to learn to fly a space ship so he could get the great big huge

magnet and rescue his own space ship from the swamp and fly back to Omicron so he could make it into a Republic. It was a very wonderful thing to be able to touch a cup that a really truly space ship had broken.

That evening, at dinner, Stevie tried to tell Mom and Dad about it only it didn't come out so real.

"And off to bed with you, young man. Eight o'clock's bed time, Doctor's orders..." Daddy was smiling.

Fighting sleepiness but reluctant to relinquish the wonders of the day, Stevie nodded. He started a ritual protest and was almost glad when Daddy said firmly, "Bed. Besides, your mother and I are stepping out tonight." So it's bed for you Stevie. Right *now*."

Stevie undressed, slow piece by slow piece, with long intervals between socks, so he could think about the day, and how Jeannie was really a princess, even if she was skinny and freckled. He took quite a time struggling out of his undershirt, so he could think about Jimmy and the space ship from Omicron. And even longer, with one arm in the sleeve of his pajamas, thinking about Mister Bob and the remarkable way he found things, like gypsy's rings and the toe of the Fabulous Roc...and...

"You're asleep sitting up!" Dad came in, tousled his hair, thrust the other arm into his pajamas, and pushed him back among the covers. "Now, just you..."

"Gerald!" Mommy was calling. "I'm—stuck... I—can't—move..."

Daddy whipped out of the room, rushing down the hall... Something was wrong with Mommy!

Stevie sat up, fighting a drowsy desire to sway back against the pillow. He forced himself up, moving his feet with mechanical slowness, blinking and yawning, down the hall. He could hear Mommy's voice, strange and metallic, going slower and slower.

I—can't—move.

I—can't—move.

I—can't—move.

I can't...

And then Daddy said something, something so fast the words blurred together. Stevie pushed the door open a crack, barely enough to look into the room. Mommy was lying on the bed, her arms strangely sprawled like Stevie's favorite toy soldier. And Daddy was zipping up her dress, zipping . . . or . . . No! Daddy wasn't zipping Mommy's dress. *Daddy was doing something to Mommy's back, with a shiny thing, like a key. And then they were staring at him, Mommy's hand going suddenly to her mouth.*

Daddy whipped across the room and caught Stevie as he swayed. "You shouldn't have gotten out of bed, young man!" Then it was all fuzzy, Daddy carrying him down the hall, tucking him into bed. And Mommy standing in the doorway, looking bleak. "Is he—all right?"

"Fine, darling. Just fine."

"Maybe we shouldn't go. After all, it's only a party."

"He'll be fine. Too much dinosaur hunting, I expect." And daddy turned him on his side. And the room faded . . . faded.

Only not quite. There was still some kind of glimmer. A faint remembering. Bright rooms, and people in shiny, silvery clothes—and—machines. . . And *Daddy winding Mommy up to go to the party. Daddy winding—Mommy—up!*

The memory stayed with Stevie the next day. *Daddy had to wind Mommy up to go to the party. With a kind of key, a shiny, bright key.* Only that didn't really make sense. Except that he could remember the shiny rooms, and the people in silvery clothes, and rows and rows of machines. Then it all fell into place. *I came from the Twenty-First Century. In a Time Machine. A really, truly, sure-enough Time Machine. Greer whillikens!* Stevie felt a great surge of excitement. That was even better than Jimmy's space ship!

Daddy and Mommy had brought him from the Twenty-First Century, and they were hiding out, here in the Twentieth Century, from . . . from . . . that wasn't quite clear, but he'd remember. Or if he talked it over with Mister Bob.

Mister Bob listened, knuckling his ear and nodding. "Well,

now, son, if there was ever a man really belonged in the Twenty-First Century, it's your Daddy. Now there's a real genius. Put the 'brains' in the satellites, didn't he? Made computers so small and fine you can carry 'em in your hand. Why, in a way, you might say, your Daddy made the Twenty-First Century—when it comes along."

"But I sorta remember the Time Machine," Stevie could recall the small, intensely bright room, or maybe it was just intense brightness, with no size at all to it.

"I'm not saying it couldn't be, son. But if there is a Time Machine, and folks from the Twenty-First Century, your Dad isn't hiding from 'em. Why, if there was a Time Machine, they'd come swooping back here to pick your Dad up as a hero. They'd give him parties and parades down Fifth Avenue—if there's a Fifth Avenue in those days. Like I say, he practically invented the Twenty-First Century."

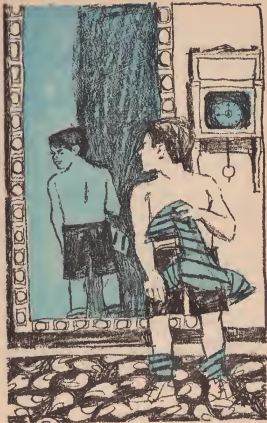
Mister Bob knuckled his ear, and then punched Stevie's arm, lightly. "You just be as proud as you can of your Dad. And don't go worrying."

Stevie went home, feeling better, but still puzzling over it. *Daddy had been winding Mommy up. And she had laid in the special chair with the concealed button.*

The button wasn't really so concealed, Stevie sneaked in and lay in the chair, reaching far around for the knob. The chair moved and pulsed, all by itself, sending waves through him—waves that felt—funny—at first, then good. Almost as good as being held in Mommy's arms and rocked.

He turned off the chair and went upstairs to puzzle it out. He couldn't really remember any place but here. This town. And only for the last month or so. Before that was hazy. Like they'd pulled down a thick shade between him and remembering. Oh, he had a sort of big memory, a kind of a lump memory. But not clear, sharp things. Like what had his room in the big city looked like? Or who gave him the erector set? Or how it *felt* when he broke his arm. Oh, he knew he'd broken his arm, but it was more like being told he'd broken his arm.

And hadn't he ever had a dog? It seemed, somewhere, oh,



way back, he remembered a dog. Or being told he'd had a dog.

*He'd been told!* He didn't really have memories. They were somebody else's memories, planted in him. They had taken his own memories—and—hidden them—buried them under this other somebody's memories. He *knew*, now. He was *sure*. He came from the Twenty-First Century. In a Time Machine. And he had been somebody very important. Maybe the King—or Emperor—or President of The World. And he was being hidden here in the Twentieth Century.

But why? He couldn't remember why.

He could talk it over with Daddy, man-to-man. And Daddy would tell him. Maybe even show him where they had hidden the Time Machine.

But Daddy was late tonight. So he and Mommy sat down to supper without him, and Mrs. Sturgess was serving. Mrs. Sturgess, small and dumpy and kind of sour-nice, had been coming in to "do" for the last week or so, and then to help with dinner. Mommy needed more time in her special chair.

Steve looked at Mommy now, really studying her. She looked paler. And her eyes were—tired. And her hands didn't move as briskly as they had. She seemed to make an effort to reach for the spoon, and stirred the coffee as if it was awful thick and heavy.

"Eat your dinner, Stevie, and don't gawp. Mrs. Sturgess, some more peas, please... And..." Mommy's face was suddenly flushed and then very white—and her voice turned that funny way and died almost to a whisper...slowing...

"Call...Mister...Bellamy..."

"Call...Mister...Bellamy..."

"Call...Mister..."

Mrs. Sturgess swept around the table, catching her as she toppled. "Boy! Call your Daddy. At the laboratory!"

But just then Daddy charged through the front door, scooping Mommy out of Mrs. Sturgess' arms and stalking toward the stairs, talking down at Mommy. "You're all right old girl. You're just fine. Fine. Fine."

He went on saying "Fine" all the way upstairs, practical-



ly running with Mommy limp and her head bobbing and her feet swinging, slack and loose.

Stevie was scared. Sick scared. And even Mrs. Sturgess seemed shocked into silence. Stevie crept out of the room and up the stairs. He was very quiet. Carefully he leaned against the door of Mommy's room, not quite daring to look, yet seeing in the mirror. Daddy had flung Mommy face down across the bed, like a limp doll, and was ripping at the back of her dress.

*Then he had something shiny in his hands, twisting, at Mommy's back. Stevie shut his eyes, not wanting to watch, not wanting to know.*

But he did know. With sick certainty he knew. Mommy was a robot. A Twenty-First Century robot. And she was his keeper. He, Stevie, was a prisoner here in the Twentieth Century. And his keepers were robots. Mommy and Daddy!

It was all so clear. That's why Daddy was so much smarter than everybody else. He wasn't *really* smarter. It was just that he was a smarter robot—from the Twenty-First Century.

Sick and frightened, Stevie crept back into his room, closed the door, and locked it tight. He heard the front door close downstairs, and knew that Mrs. Sturgess had left without even doing the dishes. He didn't like Mrs. Sturgess. She made him eat everything on his plate when Mommy and Daddy weren't home.

Mommy and Daddy! Stevie went into his bathroom. He wasn't certain he knew what it meant to be afraid, but he was pretty sure he was plenty scared now. Slowly he took off his T-shirt. For a full minute he stood there staring at the top of his face in the bathroom mirror.

Then, biting his lower lip, he reached his right hand behind his back and felt as far back there as he could go, running his fingers up and down, looking for...looking for...the key hole.

His right arm wouldn't stretch all the way to the middle of his back.

He tried and he strained, but it wouldn't go all the way.

He tried his left arm, but it wouldn't go all the way back either. Mommy's key hole was in the middle of her back, up near the shoulders. Maybe if he looked in a mirror...

Stevie stood on the edge of the bathtub, balancing himself with both hands on the wash basin, and twisted around at the hips. His neck wouldn't go far enough. He couldn't see enough of his back to be sure.

Then he remembered! The old piece of mirror hidden in his bottom drawer. He pulled the drawer open and scattered its contents. There it was! Big enough to do the job!

Stevie went back in the bathroom and perched himself once again on the rim of the bathtub. But this time, he faced away from the mirror over the sink. Then he balanced himself with one hand and held up the piece of mirror with the other. It jiggled funny, like in the barber shop when the barber shows you how you look, but it worked!

*There was no key hole!* He was almost positive! All over his back he looked, and there was no hole. *He wasn't a robot! Mommy was a robot, and maybe Daddy too, but not him, not Stevie!*

He jumped off the tub in a quick bound, breathing a great sigh of relief. At least *he* wasn't a robot. Now he could figure things out. Tomorrow he'd tell Mr. Bob all about it. Maybe Mr. Bob would help.

No, he wouldn't tell Mr. Bob! He'd go right up to Mommy and Daddy and tell *them* he knew. First thing in the morning! Very first thing!

It was late. Oh so late. And he was tired. It had been a very long day. With many discoveries too incredible to believe. Things would work out. Tomorrow things would work out.

Stevie wearily got into his pajamas.

It had been a very long day.

Mommy was a robot.

Mommy run down. Something happened inside Mommy that made her run down. And Daddy had to wind her up again.

Mommy was a robot.

Tears started to fill Stevie's eyes as he reached the side

of his bed and began to turn down the covers. But what was happening? All of a sudden he felt so strange. Those lights. Those silvery people. Those machines. Mommy's a robot.

Stevie's arms jerked to a sudden halt. He stood there, balanced on one leg, the bed covers laced over the fingers of his rigid left hand.

And only then he knew the truth.

And only then he knew the truth.

And only then he knew the truth.

And only then he knew the truth.

And only then he knew the truth.

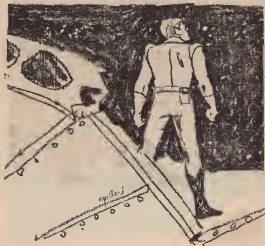


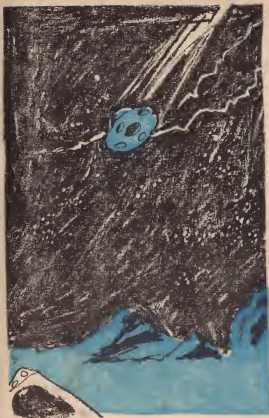


*Your spaceship has crashed on an uncharted planet. There's no way to repair it. Then suddenly, from out of the sky, another spaceship appears. It's a "being from another galaxy." Will it be friend...or executioner?*

# GREETINGS, FRIEND!

THE ECKNODE FELT the last, pulsing flicker of the storm receding over the far jagged hills, and sighed. It had been a beautiful storm, with wild, blue-white bolts of lightning ripping across the blue-black sky, lighting with fierce





clarity the tumultuously rolling clouds.

The clouds hadn't actually been rolling, of course. But the flashes were so intensely brief, so starkly clear that the motion was frozen, a crisp still picture of storm, rather than storm itself. -

Yet the storm had been there. The Ecknode had felt it, every vibrating tingle of it, every mighty surge of vast electric energy, hurtling from cloud to cloud. Occasionally it had flashed from dark cloud, vividly underlit, to starkly outlined tree, suddenly riven and shattered. He had felt those, too, through his broad palms pushed flat against the earth, holding his long, lean body half erect so he could look up at the fierce, wild beauty of the storm.

Now the storm was gone and the Ecknode could feel the first tentative thrust of fresh, cool wind that would sweep the roiling clouds away.

He lifted his head, turned his face down toward the wind and let it blow coolly against his cheeks. It felt good against his face, like a draught of cold, clear water after eating too much sweet. The storm had been too beautiful. He was surfeited with it. Too much like home.

That reminded the Ecknode and he sat up straight, hugging his knees, feeling momentarily lost and frightened.

Why *shouldn't* he feel lost? He *was* lost, lost in a world he had never known, deep in a galaxy never before visited, an uninhabited world, with no way of going back to his people. That was enough to frighten anyone.

Rationalization. The Ecknode smiled to himself. *Now, by simple rationalization, I know I am lost and have justification for being frightened.* But rationalization and justification weren't enough. They didn't satisfy. There was still loneliness.

It had been like that. The Ecknode paused to check his calculations, taking into consideration the periodicity of this unknown planet and translating it into days and hours on his own world. Fourteen months and thirty-two days. Five days short of a year on his world.

Judging by the cycle of nature he had observed here, that

was slightly over a complete revolution of this unknown world around its alien sun. He couldn't be more accurate than that, not without instruments. And the instruments were in the shattered nose of his ship, forever a shining and obliquely awry monument to failure on this strange and lonely world.

He couldn't even give this world accurate co-ordinates, to relate it in the vastness of space to his own world. The accident—the original accident—had happened somewhere—just “somewhere”—out there in space just as he had come out of hyperspace and before he could co-ordinate his instruments for placing this new bit of the universe he was to explore.

A shattering impact, a wildly eccentric roll of the ship, then endless spinning, until he had blacked out again.

Fortunately he had still been in his sealed cubicle for the transition from hyperspace to normal space, and hadn't died, hadn't even felt the final, jarring impact as the helmeted ship had buried its shattered nose in this alien wilderness.

Fortunate? The Ecknode stared off toward the tilted metal needle of his ship and then around at the trees, the deep, lush undergrowth.

All unknown. All strange. Yet familiar now. He had identified them, one by one, related them as closely as possible to species on his own world. He had done it meticulously, recording everything just as if it were a report one of his superiors might some day read.

No one would. There was no way back. And no one would come searching for him. Oh, they'd search, all right. The ship was valuable. He was valuable—and a human life. But where would they search? He himself hadn't known where his ship would emerge from the unpredictable hyperspace. That information he should have gained after he came out—and sent word back by sub-etheric radio. But he hadn't had time. Now they wouldn't know where, in the immeasurable vastness of space, to search for him.

No, no one would come. Ever. So what was so fortunate about not dying in sudden, swift obliteration?



Hope. That was what sustained him, even when he knew, by cold calculation, that there was no real hope. Just to see a human face again, to smile, to grasp a hand, to feel once again the quick, sharp tingle of meeting a fellow man, the quick surge of sheer human energy passing between them.

For a moment he clasped one hand in the other, pressed them tight, willing the energy to come, a feeling to generate, and sighed. It didn't happen. There was no tingle, no energy that surged into the eyes, lighting them with electric brightness, no answering warmth, no vibrations along the flaccid nerves. He let his hands fall apart, staring at them. No, it takes two to make a greeting.

The Ecknode sighed. "I'm lonely. The lonely Ecknode". He smiled wryly. "The only lonely Ecknode".

He did not think of himself by name because he had no name, which was odd for so gregarious a person, but on his home planet he had not needed a name. A designation, yes. A complex encephalic formula, an ordered jumble of numbers and letters and unspoken symbols that told a friend—or a stranger, for that matter, if you could find a stranger on the gregarious Ecknode world—just who and what he was. A name was unnecessary. It was all told in a message that flashed in pure thought energy from Ecknode to Ecknode. He did not think of himself as telepathic, or even of being without speech or hearing. On a world where all communication is at high-frequency level, in current generated by the brain, and passed on, direct and tinglingly clear, where was the need of speech? The creation of every noise also created energy, submicroscopic perhaps, but energy, and that energy had its own particular electronic value, detectable by the sensitive Ecknode brain. So he had no need of hearing.

The Ecknode thought his designation and then read it slowly, savoring it. His whole life. An interesting life. Even an exciting one. He added a few numerals and a symbol. They told, briefly and succinctly, of the accident and his life on the alien planet. He was surprised that he hadn't done

it before, and then he wasn't surprised. There had been no need. There was no one to receive that flash of confidence, that tingling revelation of personality. Still, he added them, imprinting forever on the electro-encephalograph of his brain. Just in case.

Just in case. He stood up, not smiling now, and stared at the sky. The wind had swept the roiling clouds away, bundled them up like snow-white laundry behind the hills, and the sky was clear. Too clear, too blue, with a blueness that stretched away to infinity though he knew that was wrong. The blueness was only an envelope of atmosphere. Outside that was the desolate blackness of space—and that was infinite, or so nearly infinite as not to matter. He paused, willing himself not to think of it. They'll never find me on this lost and alien world. And then he realized he *had* thought it, the important part of it, after all.

The Ecknode shrugged and walked toward his shattered ship. An alien world, yes, but a good one. Young yet, as worlds go, full of boundless energy, crackling with it. That storm, just now. He sighed, reliving it. Not like his Ecknode world, where all energy had to be created. This was beautiful. Magnificent! Such primitive violence. Such prodigious flaunting of energy. He sighed, surfeited.

He was almost at the slanting needle of his ship before he caught it, so surfeited with the storm was he. But he did catch it, a faint, far-off release of energy. Man-made energy. He whirled and faced up to the immense blue sky, scanning it. Whatever had created that energy wasn't visible. Not yet. But it was coming closer.

He frowned, analyzing it. Man-made, yes. But different. He couldn't fit it to any Ecknode pattern he knew. Close but not quite here yet. A spaceship, yes, and coming rapidly closer. But that energy pattern was new. Perhaps it was a type of ship they had developed since he had left his world.

Suddenly it got through to him. A spaceship was coming!

A spaceship!

Sparks danced in his eyes, his hands and arms tingled, his feet stood rooted, but his wildly corruscating thoughts spun madly, blotting out the pattern he was trying to read so desperately.

A spaceship! He tilted his face up, turning slowly back and forth, feeling the sky for that energy pattern, but he could get nothing, see nothing. The sparks that danced in his eyes blinded him. He forced himself to calmness, to control of those wild surges that tingled through him. Tune it in! Tune the spaceship in!

He couldn't get it again! He reached! He extended the limits of his absorption to their uttermost, but the energy pattern was gone.

Perhaps a spaceship had just passed by, just at the limits of his energy pattern. So near—and gone.

The surge within him died, and he slumped. Hope had been too much for him. Perhaps he had just conjured that pattern up, out of his own longing. No. In that case it would have been a familiar pattern, not one just a little off-beat. He had actually gotten it—and lost it.

Despair closed down, black, overwhelming. The Ecknode staggered as he turned again toward the shattered ship. *It's gone! Human contact, so briefly close, is gone. I can't stand it. Not again. There are ways to—end it.* The means were in the ship, means for quick, painless, death.

He started toward the ship—and caught it again.

This time the pattern was different—louder, clearer, and from a different direction, from the other rim of this alien world. The Ecknode spun on his heels, peering up into the sky.

From the opposite side of the world! Of course! The unknown spaceship had swung in an orbit around his world. With the violence of the storm between them, he had not been able to sort out the energy pattern. Now he got it, clear, direct, up there!

His face, focused on the source and followed it, coming closer.

Human contact! His own kind! To meet his own kind again! To touch another Ecknode's hand, to feel the thoughts well up, to communicate again! He felt dizzy with the delight of it.

He stumbled away from the tall, leaning spire of his ship, lest it get between him and those blessed waves of energy. The ship was closer. He could almost fancy he saw it, high in the blue immensity, but knew he couldn't. It hadn't hit the atmosphere yet. The energy released when it hit the atmosphere would be different, the pattern lower in the scale. He tried calculating just where in the scale it would be...and failed. He couldn't concentrate that deeply. He could only wait, tingling.

Now it was in the atmosphere! The pattern was a little different from what he had expected, but they could have changed the shape of the ship. This would be fatter than his and blunter in the nose. This was an entirely new energy pattern from the exhaust of the ship. Not like his at all. They must have discovered something really different for a fuel. Or gone backward.

The Ecknode could feel the energy waves wash over him and knew they were atomic, calibrated in a scale he knew. But that was old. Out of date. Except for scout ships.

Scout ships! Of course. Somewhere, far beyond his range, there was a new, sleek mother ship, and this was a short-range scout, sent to search nearby planets. He tingled with the delight of his comprehension. The scout was almost overhead.

He knew, from the slight stutter in the pattern, the moment they had sighted his wreckage. Yes. The scout ship was pulling up. He could actually see it, blunt, stubby, with three triangular fins, rearing up and back, as if a strong hand were on the reins. Now it was swinging over, in a slow, graceful parabola, and coming back. Coming back!

Knowing it was useless, still he waved both arms wildly, leaping up and down, pointing to a spot where there was sand and almost no vegetation to catch fire. Fire would mean that much longer delay and he didn't think he could stand there, watching fire form even a temporary barrier between

him and the men in the ship.

Almost as if the man in the strange ship could see him, which was, of course, ridiculous, the scout upended and then came balancing down delicately on its fiery tail. The Ecknode closed his eyes in ecstacy, absorbing the energy pattern, letting it wash into his consciousness, almost devouring it, savoring each shortening blast until there were none, and the ship was down.

He opened his eyes, staring. Even at this distance he could see the scout was strange, alien, non-Ecknode. He felt a lurching sickness within himself. Non-Ecknode! Perhaps non-human. He had known he might encounter non-human intelligences in exploring space, but this was the first time it had happened. A non-human! How did you communicate? If you couldn't walk up, hand outheld, and feel it grasped, feel the tingle of friendship all through your being, how did you reach a non-human intelligence?

Sickened, the Ecknode stood at the blackened edge of sand and burned vegetation, waiting for it to cool, waiting to greet the non-human.

When Carl Tatum first caught a glimpse on his vidiscreen of the splintered spire of the spaceship he thought for a sickening instant it was the big space cruiser from which he was now hopelessly lost.

His one chance at rescue was gone. Snuffed out.

Then he realized with horror how selfish that had been. If that shattered wreck below was his space cruiser, then a complete crew had gone down with her, men he had known and respected. He stepped up the magnification and peered, breathing a sigh of relief. It wasn't the cruiser! It was . . . and he felt cold all over . . . *it was alien!*

That meant that somewhere in the universe was a Race intelligent enough to develop space travel. That had been expected, but to come on the evidence here, on this unknown planet, when he was incapable of getting word back to his ship, that was ironic.

Of course, it could have been there for a thousand years. No, the vegetation around it was still crushed from its land-

ing. Recent, then. And there might be survivors. But they'd be alien, even non-human, perhaps.

Still, his job had been to contact intelligent beings—if any—on other worlds. And this was the first indication he'd had of any. Then get to it, boy, even if you *are* lost.

He swung the ship up and over and set her down, slowly, too busy with the controls to take in his surroundings, beyond what lay immediately beneath. A jolt, a slight rocking of the scout, and then silence as the engines cut out. He was down!

For a long moment he sat at the controls, seeing them without even being aware of them. Then, slowly, he reached out for levers and knobs that would bring him information about this world and its atmosphere. Oxygen content a little high, no known lethal gases, temperature and humidity near Earth normal . . . he went through the whole manual. Satisfied it was a suitable world, one in which he might even go bareheaded, he nodded, still sitting, his hand half extended to turn on the local-range vidiscreen. What would he see—if anything?

Almost reluctantly he turned it on, adjusted it—and stared. *A man! A human being!* He stood at the edge of the blackened sand and vegetation warily, watching the ship. An alien, yes, but a human being!

Carl's fingers fumbled at the straps and he eased himself out of the chair, unsure of himself in gravity after weeks in space, and started for the airlock, his shambling pace turning to a run as he neared it.

Another human being! After he had been lost for weeks, and had given himself up for dead!

Wait a minute. How would they talk? In what language? By what means? Suppose the alien out there didn't want to talk, wasn't friendly, was even a natural killer.

At the lock he halted, looking over the assortment of weapons. Just in case. He strapped on a hand gun and picked up a rifle. Maybe they weren't enough. Who knew what sort of reaction an alien might have? A bullet might not stop

him. Carl looked over the array of weapons, pondering. Now those hand grenades, electrically detonated, would kill anything. You didn't have to hit a guessed-at, possibly vital spot. They just—whoom! and the enemy wasn't there. He took two down and fastened them gingerly to the slots in his belt. Now he was ready.

Still he stood a moment longer at the lock before he opened it. The first meeting between two intelligent races! Together, somehow, they would touch back to their respective worlds, unite intelligent humanity. He tried to keep that thought foremost, giving the moment significance. Instead it developed into jitters and just plain longing to see another human face, to stretch out a hand, to feel it grasped in friendship. A lump clogged his throat and he paused to clear it before he flung open the door and faced the alien.

The lock in the strange ship was opening. The Ecknode watched it fearfully, hungrily. Would something monstrous, incommunicable, emerge? Would . . . . No! It was a man! A human! A bit strange-looking, in odd clothing—and with hand weapons! For the first time the Ecknode was frightened. He hadn't thought of weapons. An Ecknode didn't use them. Yet he knew what they were. He read the energy pattern of the human's mind and knew the weapons fired destruction pellets. And one was pointed at him right now. Right between the eyes!

The Ecknode sent out an energy pattern from his brain, a warm, friendly pattern, and watched closely. The human was getting it, staring bewilderedly, but getting it. And his mouth moved in some pattern the Ecknode couldn't distinguish, but evidently it meant communication. The Ecknode reached, grasping for the energy pattern of the other human's brain. It was a little confused. He saw fear draining away, bewilderment, and then sudden, warm friendship. The other human had gotten his energy message.

The Ecknode started across the blackened sands. They were still a little too warm for comfort but what did that matter? Here before him was a friend. See, the other human had dropped the thing he thought of as a rifle and flung his

little hand gun aside. He came down the steps, on to the hot sands and started across, his hand coming up. The Ecknode sighed happily. In another instant he would grasp a friendly hand, feel the deep, satisfying tingle of a surge of friendship—and they would know each other. They would be friends.

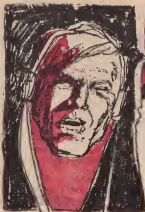
The other human was standing there, grinning, his hand out. In that instant, the Ecknode saw the significance. The other human had a spaceship—a spaceship intact and workable. Undoubtedly with tools. Between them they could get at the instruments in the Ecknode's shattered ship, communicate with his world, and bring their two worlds together. It was a wonderful moment, a supreme moment! Two civilizations would join hands. The Ecknode stretched out his hand and grasped the other human's hand. This must be special. He concentrated all his violent energy, all he had absorbed from the wild storm, and beamed it through his arm.

Even as the first surges hit the other human, the Ecknode knew something was wrong. The other human had stiffened, then was writhing, twisting, the smile distorting into a grimace of agony, his face blackening. He hadn't beamed back. He hadn't tingled with energy . . . There was something wrong.

The Ecknode didn't have time to think further. The surge of electric energy had set off the hand grenades.







# THE NEW WAY



*The gas chamber and guillotine and electric chair are all old fashioned. There's a new way to punish criminals. But it's too horrible to even talk about.*

The night was dark, with a fog that blurred vision despite brilliant lights spaced along the road curving through the park. Traffic had thinned out, and only an occasional car glided past. Then from the distance came the harsh rhythmic

sound of approaching heels.

A solitary figure came into view, indistinct in the fog. As the figure approached, it resolved into a well-dressed man of about sixty. He strode with an athletic pace along the sidewalk and past a low spreading tree growing to one side.

As he passed the tree, three figures rushed out behind him. There was a blur of motion, a sharp flash of reflected light, and a brief struggle. The three knelt for a moment over the fallen figure, then dragged it back into the shadows.

A car, wet and gleaming, slid past with a hiss of tires on the wet pavement.

Burr Macon, Chief of Criminal Documents, snapped off the screen and glanced at Hostetter, who was in charge of Apprehension and Arrests.

Macon said, "There you are. Stet. Time of Crime, 2:46 a.m., yesterday. Place, Central Park, within twenty feet of Criminal Activities Documentor #18,769,483 (fixed)."

Hostetter nodded. "Any previews or follow-ups?"

"Just a matter of patience and routine," said Macon. He picked up a sheet of paper. "The criminals entered the park together at 12:00 a.m. They passed, respectively, Documentors (fixed) #18,442,612, #18,696,381, #18,512,397, and fourteen others before they arrived at the scene of the crime. They also passed through the range of Documentor (mobile) #146,987, but that merely duplicates information we already have. After the crime, the criminals, still moving in a group, passed six fixed documentors, left the park, split up, and made their way separately past various other documentors to a rooming house. They went inside and came out separately after about two hours. Right now, mobile documentors are with each of them, wherever they go. When you want to pick them up, it will be a routine matter."

Hostetter nodded approvingly. "How about the victim?"

"We've traced him back, too. He was apparently just out for a walk."

"At a quarter to three in the morning?"

Macon shrugged. "We don't have all the information on him, yet. But maybe he was a night-owl. Who knows?"

Hostetter nodded. "Well, I'll let you know what turns up. Thanks for the information."

"Glad to help," said Macon. He watched Hostetter go out with the folder, then sat down thoughtfully at his desk.

"What," he asked himself, "would it be like to live in a world where there were no crime documentors?" The thought made him uneasy, because he knew that until a few years ago, people had lived in a world where there were no crime documentors. But then the techniques of miniaturization had developed into techniques of microminiaturization, and these in turn into techniques of submicrominiaturization, and now as a result hosts of tiny inexpensive devices watched the public streets, subways, and parks of the whole city.

They hadn't, Macon admitted, prevented crime. But they had certainly made it hard to commit a crime without being caught and punished.

He was uneasy as he thought of the punishment.

Burr Macon spent the rest of the morning in desk work, and in supervising the test of a new type of mobile documentor. Later, returning from lunch, he found a note from Hostetter:

Burr—

I picked up the three who killed the man in the park, and they broke down under questioning. Their purpose was simple robbery, but one of them got too enthusiastic with his knife. The victim was a diplomat newly returned from a long stay in Turkey. That accounts for his restlessness, by the way. While it was the dead of the night here, it was late morning in Turkey, and he wasn't readjusted yet to our time.

We've checked the criminals for everything, including indications of deep hypnosis, and are clearing the business with the State Department and the F.B.I. So far as we can tell so far this is a plain case of ignorance combined with an

urge for unearned money. But the crime has to be punished.

Since the Farr Bill was passed, punishment by directed union is optional in the State of New York. All three have chosen this. I don't know if you would like to witness this punishment, but if you would I can save you a ringside seat. It promises to be something special.

Let me know if you want to be present.

Siet.

Macon read the note over twice, noting especially the phrase "I can save you a ringside seat." From what Macon knew of directed union, a "ringside seat" at the place of punishment was like a choice spot near the electric chair at an execution. However, he decided that he should go, if only to find out for himself what it was really like.

Late that night, Macon found himself in a room about fifteen feet wide by twenty feet long. The room was, for some reason, painted a light green. Not only were the walls painted this color, but also the floor and ceiling. There was one door that opened into the room, and this too was painted light green. The door knob, and the hinges of the door were painted light green. There were no windows, the room being lighted by a bulb in a pale green globe overhead. At Macon's end of the room was a row of oak benches, shellacked but otherwise left their natural color. Before the benches was a long table, painted light green. On the light green table lay eight sets of what appeared to be headphones. With each set of headphones was a flat box with a pointer on a numbered dial.

At the other end of the room were two wheeled stretchers. One was covered with a sheet that outlined a body. The other stretcher was empty, but was equipped with four sets of broad straps. At the head of this empty stretcher lay what looked like a set of headphones, their cord neatly coiled.

Macon took his seat beside Hostetter, who sat at the extreme right of the bench. Several other men sat down to Macon's left. All looked uneasily at the headphones before them, then at the sheet draped over the stretcher at the far

end of the room. Macon found himself glancing uneasily from the headphones before him to the headphones lying on the empty stretcher across the room. They appeared to be identical.

To Macon's left, someone cleared his throat. Macon glanced  
Infinity      Punishment To Fit The Crime      Galley—2  
at Hostetter, and saw that he was sitting with his eyes tightly shut, and his clenched hands resting on the light green table.

The door opened, and a male attendant wearing a light green smock came into the room, walked to the empty stretcher, picked up the headphones and put them on the floor. He then rolled the empty stretcher out the door. The door closed behind him.

There was an intense quiet in the room, in which Macon could hear someone to his left breathing with a faint wheeze.

Macon looked around the room, and everywhere he looked, he was confronted with the same unvarying shade of light green. His gaze was drawn to the one differently-colored object at the far end of the room. He found himself staring at the stretcher covered with a sheet. The sheet was plainly lying across a human body.

The door opened, and the other stretcher was wheeled in. This stretcher, too, now had a human form lying face-up on it, and covered with a sheet. But here, the sheet reached only to the neck, and the face, pale and grinning nervously, was visible above the sheet.

Two attendants, both green-smocked, wheeled the stretcher so that it lay side-by-side close to the other stretcher. The head of the prisoner twisted to look at the covered form on the stretcher lying close beside him, and his grin vanished. His eyes widened. He glanced around, and swallowed.

One of the attendants picked up the headphone and their cord, and set them on the prisoner's stretcher, close to his head.

The prisoner twisted to look at the phones.

The door opened again, and a man in a plain business suit walked into the room, glanced at his wristwatch, and closed the door behind him. He stood about six feet from

the door, with his back toward the door, and waited.

One of the attendants smoothed the sheet over the prisoner, then smoothed the sheet over the other stretcher. The attendants took their places, one at the head of the prisoner's stretcher, one at the head of the other stretcher.

The room became very quiet.

The prisoner on the stretcher swallowed again, looked the room, then twisted his head to look at the stretcher beside him. He tried to glance back at the attendants behind him.

The man in the business suit by the door glanced again at his wristwatch, and nodded slightly to one of the attendants. Then he reached into an inside coat pocket, and drew out a sheet of paper. The paper crackled loudly in the quiet room. In a low monotonous voice, he began to read:

"The penalty for murder in the State of New York normally is prolonged imprisonment, or death by electrocution. Owing to the advancement of technology, however, a more enlightened method of dealing with lawbreakers has been devised and is legally applicable in the State of New York. This method is known as "Directed Union." You, the confessed prisoner, have chosen this alternative. In the course of the next ten minutes, you will undergo the experience of directed union, and it is to be hoped that from this experience you will derive a new and firm appreciation of the inadvisability of causing injury to others.

"To the spectators witnessing the re-education of the prisoner, it is only necessary to state that the dial before you, numbered from one to ten, indicates the degree of conformity of your experience with that of the prisoner. 'Ten' is the setting corresponding to a full identity of experience. For reasons of mental hygiene the dial is pegged at the numeral 'five', which is roughly one-half the intensity experienced by the prisoner.

"Bear in mind that this particular prisoner *killed* a fellow human. If the experience becomes too intense, turn the pointer to zero on the dial. If you become sick, please leave

the room quietly. The attendants will be fully occupied, and cannot assist you.

"At the beginning of the directed union, place the headphones on your head, as if they were ordinary listening devices. Remove the headphones at any time, but first reset the pointer to zero. Failure to do this may cause a violent and prolonged headache.

"The Directed Union will now begin, by authority of the State of New York, and by the choice and consent of the prisoner, freely given.

"Proceed."

At the far end of the room, one attendant put the headphones on the head of the prisoner.

The other attendant turned back the sheet on the other stretcher, to show the pale lifeless head of a man about sixty, a set of headphones in place on his head.

The prisoner jerked his head around suddenly, and shouted, "No!"

The headphones twisted off onto the stretcher.

The attendant behind him opened a long black leather-bound case, and took out a hypodermic.

"No!" screamed the prisoner. He twisted violently against the straps.

The attendant turned down the sheet on one side of the stretcher, inserted the hypodermic needle, and pressed the plunger.

"No!" screamed the prisoner. "No! No!"

Macon swallowed and looked down at the green-colored table.

The screams of the prisoner died away into a moan.

Macon looked up.

The prisoner was lying still, a blank expression on his face. The attendant was putting the hypodermic back in the case. He put the case away, drew the sheet up again, and waited.

A look of conscious horror replaced the vacant expression on the face of the prisoner.

The attendant placed the headphones on the head of the



prisoner.

At Macon's right, Hostetter nudged him. "Phones," Hostetter whispered. "You'll miss it all."

Macon drew a slow breath and put on the phones. He adjusted the pointer to "five."

For a moment, nothing happened. Then he became aware of a grayness. Then there was a bright light that gradually died away. Then another light. Macon closed his eyes. Before him, he could see fog, and a highway. A car glided past. Just ahead was another dazzling light above the highway.

"Odd thing," he was thinking. "Here it is, the pit of the night in New York, and yet it's morning in Istanbul. It seems strange to be back. Lord, the air is fresh. It does a man good to get out, move around. Trouble with our generation is, we don't get enough exercise."

Somewhere, a peculiar high-pitched keening sound began, but the thoughts went on unruffled. "It's just like Benita to say, 'Don't go out, Ted. It's late, and you don't know who may be out. You could get mugged, or beaten up, or anything.'"

He laughed to himself, and thought, "It may be night, but it's certainly a well-lighted night. Cars going by. The whole place filled with spy devices. Any criminal should know he'd be caught. Odd, though. There's an unpleasant sensation—a sort of—grimness up ahead there. Not grimness. A sort of grisly feeling. Maybe Benita— No, I can't permit myself to go psychic at my age. —I'll laugh about this later tonight."

There was a steady rhythmic sound of footsteps in his ears, and he realized that these were the sounds of his own heels striking the cement pavement. Certainly, he thought, no-one hearing that hard regular beat would think that he was uneasy.

Ahead, to his left, he could see a sort of low tree to one side of the sidewalk. He felt an increased uneasiness, stiffened his jaw, and strode on toward the tree.

"No!" screamed a voice somewhere. "No! No!"

He opened his eyes. For an instant, he was confused.

Then he saw the two bodies, under their sheets, at the opposite end of the pale green room.

Abruptly, Macon remembered where he was.—And who he was.

He shut his eyes.

Something—He was aware of a swaying of branches. There was a scuff of leather close behind him. A feeling of dread gripped him, and he struggled like a man in a nightmare to force his body to run. Hands gripped his arms at the elbows. Something smashed at the back of his knees, buckling them under him. There was a sudden brief pain at his back, then a sense of weakness.

Abruptly, rage flowed through him. While he was still falling, he jerked both arms forward. His right arm twisted free. He reached up to grip the little finger of the arm around his throat. Again there was brief pain at his back.

And again, and again.

His right hand slipped, and fell away.

The bright lights began to dim.

"No," he thought desperately. "*I don't want—*"

The grayness faded. There was a sense of distance. Then a sort of snap, as if whatever Macon had been in contact with was gone.

Macon opened his eyes. The room was intently quiet. But, he thought, I'm still in contact with *something*. But *what*?

He closed his eyes. There was a peculiar sensation, as of stiffness, dullness, a feeling such as one might have in a deserted house filled with a lifetime's treasures, but with the roof fallen in, the boards rotting, the plaster falling from the ceiling, and a must and mold talking hold everywhere.

A sense of horror began to grip him.

He opened his eyes.

His left hand, resting on the green table by the dial, twisted the pointer back to zero.

All along the green table, hands were twisting at the pointers.

Macon tore off the headphones.

A horrible scream gurgled up from the stretcher and filled the room.

Macon shut his eyes.

There was the sound of a body hitting the floor across the room. Then there was a floundering, flopping sound, as of a caught fish in the bottom of a boat.

The scream went on. Then words could be made out, as if spoken with a thick tongue. At first the words weren't clear. Then there was a vivid, clearly spoken cry:

"Oh, my God! Oh, help me! *Please help me!*"

There was a sudden, total silence.

Macon, both hands gripping the edge of the green table, stayed still for a long time, then forced open his eyes.

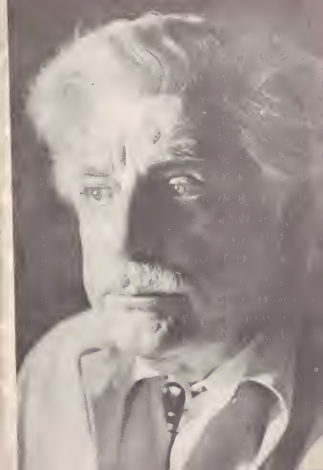
One of the attendants was wheeling the prisoner, white-faced and unconscious, toward the door. The other attendant was drawing the cover back over the lifeless face on the other stretcher. On the floor beside the stretcher lay the headset, and its cord neatly coiled.

The official in street clothes glanced at Macon and the others on the bench. "We anticipate that this form of punishment will cut the rate of certain categories of crime considerably. "If any of you would like to stay, several other prisoners are scheduled for similar treatment. It will only be a comparatively short wait."

"Thank you," said Macon. There was a mumble of voices around him.

Hastily, they all made for the hall.





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Instead of a weak, ordinary spark plug, JET-FIRE fuel igniter has a big, heavy-duty spark plug that is a thousand times the size of a regular spark plug. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably.

More important, because the JET-FIRE fuel igniter is a high-speed spark plug, it is a high-speed spark plug. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably.

## NEVER WEAR OUT—LAST FOREVER!

The **JET-FIRE** fuel igniter is not a spark plug. It is a high-speed spark plug. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably.

## HOW DO JET-FIRE FUEL IGNITERS SAVE MONEY?

First of all, because **JET-FIRE** fuel igniter is a high-speed spark plug, it is a high-speed spark plug. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably.

Second, because the **JET-FIRE** fuel igniter is a high-speed spark plug, it is a high-speed spark plug. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably.

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## OTHER IGNITERS?

There are other igniters that work on a similar basis. However, the **JET-FIRE** fuel igniter is the only one that is a high-speed spark plug. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably. This means the engine will run smoother, faster, and more reliably.

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